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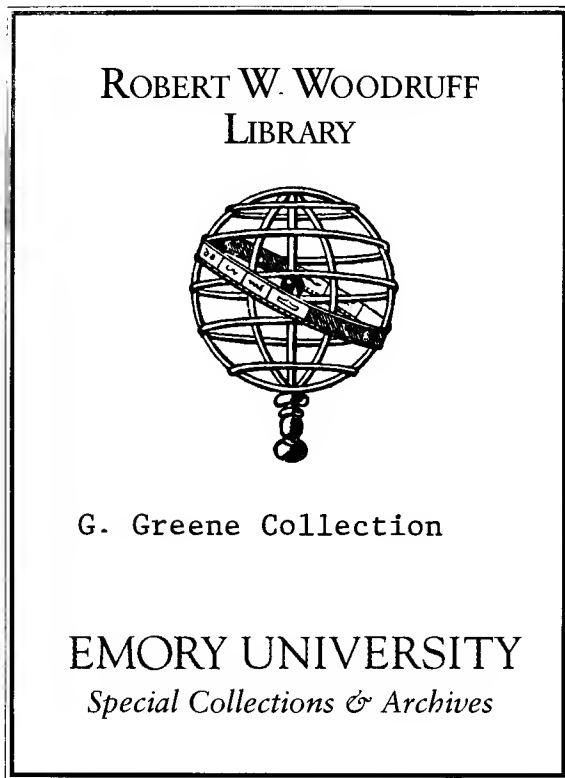
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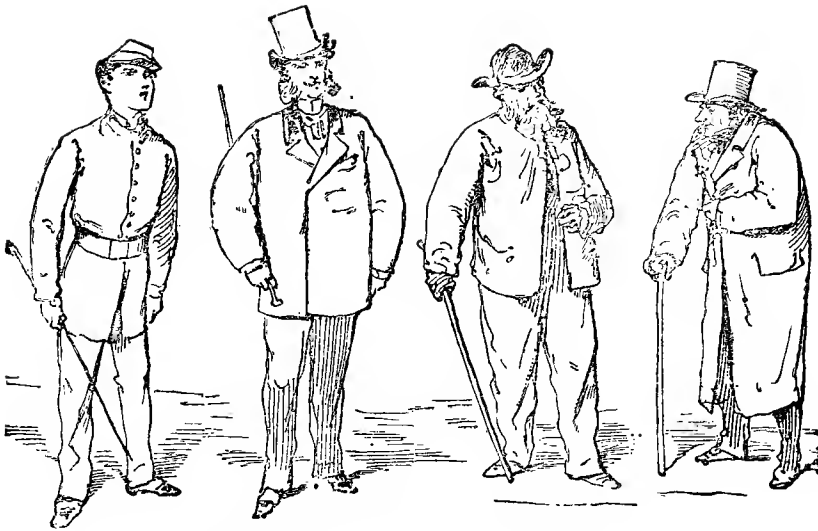
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BY EMILE GABORIAU.

LONDON:

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1883.

THE MYSTERY OF ORCIVAL.

JUST as daylight was breaking, at three o'clock, on the morning of Thursday, the 9th of July, 186—, Jean Bertaud and his son, well known as poachers and marauders among the inhabitants of Orcival—one of the pleasantest villages in the vicinity of Paris—left their cottage bound on a fishing expedition.

Laden with their nets they walked some distance along the sequestered path-way, shaded by acacias, which may be espied from the railway-station at Evry, and which leads from Orcival to the Seine; then cutting across a field adjoining Valfeuillu, the Count de Trémorrel's magnificent estate, they made for their boat, moored, as usual, some fifty yards above the bridge. On reaching the river bank, they laid down their tackle, and Jean jumped into the boat to bail out the water in the bottom. While thus engaged he noticed that one of the tholes of the old craft was on the point of breaking. "Philippe," cried he to his son, who was unravelling a net, "just find me a bit of wood to make a new thole."

The young man looked round him. There were no trees in the field where he stood; but the park of Valfeuillu was only a few yards distant. He walked towards it, and, unmindful of all enactments against trespassing, boldly jumped across the wide ditch surrounding the domain. He intended to cut a branch from one of the old willows, which hereabouts dip their drooping branches in the water; but scarcely had he drawn his knife from his pocket, glancing right and left at the same time with all a poacher's nervous cautiousness, than in a frightened voice he cried, "Father! Here! Father!"

"What's the matter?" asked the old marauder, without pausing in his work.

"Father, come here!" continued Philippe. "In Heaven's name, come here, quick!"

Jean guessed from the tone of the young man's voice that something unusual must have happened. He threw down his scoop, and quickened by anxiety reached the park in three leaps. Then suddenly pausing, he stood still, horror-stricken by the very sight that had terrified his son. On the margin of the river, among the stumps and flags, was stretched a woman's body. Her long, dishevelled hair rested among the water shrubs; her grey silk dress was soiled with blood and mire. All the upper part of her body lay in shallow water, and her head had sunk into the mud.

"A murder!" muttered Philippe, in a trembling voice.

"That's certain," answered Jean, in an indifferent tone. "But who can this woman be? One would almost say, the countess."

"We'll see," said the younger man, who was stepping towards the body when his father caught him by the arm. "What are you about, you

foolish fellow?" exclaimed Jean. "You must never touch a murdered person's body without legal authority."

"You think so?"

"Certainly. There are penalties for doing so."

"Then, let's go and inform the mayor."

"Why? as if people hereabouts were not against us enough already! Who knows they wouldn't accuse us—"

"But, father—"

"If we go and inform M. Courtois, he will ask us how we came to be in M. de Trémoré's park. What does it matter to you if the countess has been killed? They'll find her body without us. Come, let's get off."

But Philippe did not budge. "No, we ought to make this known," said he, firmly. "We are not savages. We can tell M. Courtois that we perceived the body as we passed by the park in our boat."

Old Jean resisted at first; but yielded on seeing that his son would, if need be, go to the mayor's without him. They crossed back over the ditch, and leaving their fishing tackle in the field, walked hastily towards the mayor's house.

Orcival, situated a mile or so from Corbeil, on the right bank of the Seine, is, fortunately for its inhabitants, just beyond the range of the gay and thoughtless Parisian, who, on Sundays, delights to wander through the environs of his metropolis, doing more damage on this one day than all the birds and insects can accomplish during the other six. The floral perfume wafted from every garden is not impaired as at Asnières and Meudon by the stench of stale gudgeon frying in the kitchens of waterside restaurants. The echoes have never yet responded to the coarse refrains of improvised oarsmen or to the brazen accents of their superfluous boat-horns. Stretched pleasantly along a gentle slope washed by the Seine, the white houses of Orcival intervene with many a shady nook and bower, while from their midst springs a tapering steeple which is the pride of the place. On all sides extend magnificent estates—abodes of pleasure kept up at great expense by their owners. From the summit of the slope one may espy the weather-cocks of twenty lordly châteaux. Here on the right is the forest and seigneurial residence of Mauprévoir with the Countess de la Brèche's pretty country seat. Across the river lie Mousseaux and Petit-Bourg, once belonging to the Aguados and now the property of an eminent carriage-builder. On the left among those verdant copses stands Valfeuilla, the Count de Trémoré's château; the spacious park near by being the d'Etiolle's estate. In the distance beyond, the town of Corbeil may be seen; and here, limiting the horizon, high above the oak-trees, appears the vast Darblay mill, whence comes half the flour the Parisians use in kneading their daily bread.

The mayor of Orcival, M. Courtois, resided in a handsome mansion, at the upper end of the village. He began life without a penny, and after thirty years of absorbing toil as a manufacturer, he retired with four round millions of francs at his disposal. At first he intended to live quietly with his wife and children, passing the winter in Paris and the summer at his country house; but all of a sudden ambition stirred his heart. By skilful manœuvring he contrived to induce the authorities to offer him the mayoralty of Orcival. And he accepted it, quite in self-defence, as he himself will tell you. This post is at once his happiness and his despair; but the former is real, whereas the latter is but affected. He may rail with clouded brow at the eares of power; but he enjoys its sweets and literally

overflows with satisfied vanity when with the gold-laced scarf of office around his waist he appears in triumph at the head of the municipal council.

The inmates of the mayor's house were still sound asleep when the two Bertauds raised the heavy knocker of the front door ; but after a moment, a semi-somnolent servant showed himself at one of the ground-floor windows.

"What's the matter, you rascals?" he growled.

Jean did not think it expedient to resent an insult which his reputation in the village justified only too well. "We wish to speak with the mayor," he answered. "There's urgent need of it. Please go and call him, M. Baptiste ; he won't blame you."

"I'd like to see anybody blame me," snapped Baptiste ; but, despite this rejoinder, the Bertauds had to plead with him for fully ten minutes before he could be persuaded to rouse his master. Eventually, however, they were admitted into the presence of an elderly, ruddy-faced man, at once both short and fat, and who was evidently very much annoyed at being dragged from his bed so early. This individual was M. Courtois.

"Sir," said Philippe, to whom his father had agreed to leave the talking, "we have come to acquaint you with a great misfortune. A crime has been committed at M. de Trémoré's."

M. Courtois was one of the count's friends and he turned whiter than his shirt on hearing this news. "My God !" stammered he, unable to control his emotion, "what do you say—a crime !"

"Yes ; we have just discovered a body ; and, as sure as you are here, I believe it to be that of the countess."

The mayor raised his arms to heaven, and looked bewildered. "But where—when?" he asked.

"Just now, at the edge of the park, by the water-side, as we were going to take up our nets."

"How horrible !" exclaimed M. Courtois ; "what a calamity ! So worthy a lady ! But it is not possible—you must be mistaken ; I should have been informed—"

"We saw the body distinctly, sir."

"Such a crime in my village ! Well, you have done wisely to come here. I will dress at once, and hasten off—no, wait—here Baptiste !"

The valet was not far off. With ear and eye alternately applied to the key-hole, he was listening and looking with all his might. At the sound of his master's voice he had only to stretch out his hand and open the door.

"Monsieur called me?" he asked.

"Run round for the justice of the peace," said the mayor. "There is not a moment to lose. A crime has been committed—perhaps a murder—you must make haste. And you," he added, addressing the poachers, "wait for me here while I slip on my coat."

The magistrate of Orcival at that time, M. Plantat—"papa Plantat," as he was called—had formerly been a notary at Melun. At fifty years of age, after a career of hitherto unbroken prosperity, he had lost in the same month, his wife, whom he adored, and his two sons, both promising young fellows—one eighteen years of age, and the other two-and-twenty. These losses not unnaturally crushed a man whom thirty years of happiness left without defence against misfortune. For a long time M. Plantat's reason was feared for. He grew exasperated at the mere sight of a client coming to trouble his grief with some stupid tale of self-interest ; and soon hastily disposed of his professional post and connection for about half their real value. He wished to retire somewhere, where he might allow his grief to

take full course without fear of interruption, but in time, and in accordance with an all but universal law of nature, the intensity of his sorrow diminished, and the ills of idleness became felt. The post of justice of the peace at Orcival was vacant, and M. Plantat applied for and obtained it. Once installed in his new functions he suffered less from ennui. He learned to interest himself in the many cases which came before him ; and applied to their study all the resources of an admirably balanced mind, especially expert in sifting the truth from among the many lies he was forced to hear. He persisted in living alone, despite M. Courtois's advice, pretending that society tired him, and that an unhappy man is a bore in company. Misfortune, which modifies characters for good or bad, had, to outward view, transformed him into a great egotist. He declared that he was only interested in the affairs of life as a critic weary of playing an active part. He loved to parade his apparently profound indifference for everything, swearing that a rain of fire descending upon Paris would not even make him turn his head. It indeed seemed impossible to move him, and even the recital of the most distressing events merely drew from him the exclamation : " What does it matter to me ? "

Such were the antecedents and apparent character of the man who, a quarter of an hour after Baptiste's departure, entered the mayor's house. M. Plantat was tall, and somewhat thin, but muscular. His restless eyes seemed always seeking some one or something ; his nose was long, narrow, and pointed ; his mouth well shaped, prior to his affliction, had become deformed ; the lower lip having fallen, thus imparting to his features a deceptive appearance of simplicity. " They tell me," said he, as he crossed the threshold, " that Madame de Trémorrel has been murdered. "

" These men here, at least, pretend so," answered the mayor, who had just returned to his study. M. Courtois was no longer the same man. He had had time to finish his toilet and was now doing his best to assume an air of haughty coldness. He had been reproaching himself for having compromised his dignity by showing his grief before the Bertauds.

" This is a sad event " said M. Plantat in an apparently indifferent tone, " but after all how does it concern us ? True, our official duties compel us to ascertain whether it is true and as we may require the corporal of gendarmerie I have sent word for him to join us. "

" Then let us start," said M. Courtois ; " I have my scarf in my pocket. "

They hastened off, Philippe and his father walking first, the former eager and impatient, and the latter thoughtful and reluctant. The mayor at each step gave audible expression to his perplexity. " I can't understand it," muttered he ; " a murder in my commune ! a commune where no such crime has been committed within living memory ! " And as he spoke he glanced suspiciously towards the Bertauds.

The road leading to the Count de Trémorrel's château is lined on either side by high walls. On the one hand extends the Marchioness de Lanascol's park, and on the other the spacious garden of St. Jouan. A considerable interval had now elapsed since the Bertauds first perceived the corpse lying beside the Seine and indeed it was nearly eight o'clock when the mayor, the magistrate, and their guides halted in front of the gateway conducting to M. de Trémorrel's mansion. The mayor rang, but although the bell was large and the gate merely separated from the house by a gravelled court, five or six yards across, no one appeared in answer to the summons. The mayor rang again more vigorously, and yet a third time with all his strength ; but it was in vain. In front of the entrance to Madame de

Lanascol's château, situated nearly opposite, a groom chanced to be standing engaged in cleaning and polishing a bridle bit. "It's no use ringing, gentlemen," he called; "there's nobody at home."

"How! nobody?" asked the mayor, surprised.

"I mean," said the groom, "that there's no one in but the master and mistress. The servants all went to Paris last night by the 8.40 train. They were going to sup and dance at the wedding of Madame Denis, the old cook. They are to be back this morning by the first train. I was invited myself—"

"Great God!" interrupted M. Courtois, "then the count and countess remained alone last night?"

"Yes: quite alone, sir."

"How horrible!"

This conversation seemed to make M. Plantat impatient. "Come," said he, "we cannot stay forever at this gate. The gendarmes don't come; so let us send for a locksmith."

Philippe was about to start on this errand when bursts of laughter and snatches of song were heard some distance down the road. A few minutes later five persons, three women and two men, appeared in sight. "Ah, there come M. de Trémoré's people," cried the groom; "they ought to have a key."

On perceiving the group waiting outside their master's gate, the newcomers had checked their mirth and accelerated their pace. One of them ran on in advance; this was M. de Trémoré's valet. "These gentlemen perhaps wish to speak with the Count?" queried he, bowing to the mayor and M. Plantat.

"We have rung five times, as hard as we could," said the mayor.

"That's strange," replied the valet, "the count had given us permission to go to Paris, and must have known there was no one to open the gate. I can't understand his not hearing you for he sleeps very lightly; but perhaps he has gone out."

"No," cried Philippe. "Both of them have been murdered!"

The servants seemed dismayed at this announcement. "Murdered!" exclaimed the valet. "It was for money then; it must have been known—"

"What?" sharply asked the mayor, who during the last minute had been attentively scrutinizing the elder Bertaud.

"Monsieur de Trémoré received a very large sum yesterday morning," was the reply.

"Large! yes," added one of the maids. "He had a huge package of bank notes. Madame even said to him that she should not close her eyes the whole night, with this immense sum in the house."

There was a pause; they all looked at each other with a frightened air, while M. Courtois reflected. "At what hour did you leave the château last evening?" he asked.

"At eight o'clock; we had dinner early."

"You all went away together?"

"Ycs, sir."

"You did not leave each other?"

"Not a minute."

"And you have all returned together?"

The servants exchanged significant glances. "All?" replied the maid—"that is to say, no. Guespir left us on reaching the station at Paris. He went away, saying he would join us again at Wepler's, at Batignolles, where the ball took place."

The mayor started, nudged the magistrate with his elbow, as if to attract his attention, and then asked : "And this Guespin, as you call him—did you see him again?"

"No, sir. I asked after him several times during the evening ; his absence seemed to me suspicious." The girl was evidently trying to show superior perspicacity. A little more, and she would have talked of presentiments.

"Has this Guespin been long in the house?" asked M. Courtois.

"Since the spring."

"What were his duties?"

"He was sent from Paris to take care of the rare flowers in Madame's conservatory."

"And did he know of this money?"

The servants again exchanged significant glances. "Yes," they answered in chorus, "we had talked a great deal about it among ourselves." And the maid added : "He even said to me, 'To think that Monsieur has enough money in his study to make all our fortunes.'"

"What kind of man is this Guespin?"

This question absolutely extinguished the servants' loquacity. No one dared to speak, perceiving that the least word might serve as the basis of a terrible accusation. However, the groom of the house opposite, who burned to mix himself up in the affair, had none of these scruples. "Guespin," answered he, "is a good fellow. Lord, what jolly things he knows! He knows everything you can imagine. It appears he has been rich in times past, and if he wished— But then! he likes to leave off work early, and go out on the spree. He's a crack billiard-player, I can tell you."

Papa Plantat, while listening in an apparently absent-minded way to these statements had been carefully examining the wall and the gate. He now turned, and interrupting the groom, "Enough of this," said he, in a tone of authority, which filled M. Courtois with surprise. "Before pursuing this interrogatory, let us ascertain the extent of the crime, if crime there is; for it is not yet proved. Whoever has the key must open the gate."

The valet did so and the whole party proceeded into the courtyard. In the meanwhile the gendarmes had arrived. The mayor told the corporal to follow him, and placed two men at the gate, ordering them not to allow any one to enter or leave the place, unless by his orders. Then the valet mounted the steps and opened the door of the house.

II.

If no crime had been committed at least something extraordinary had taken place at the château; of this, even impassive M. Plantat must have been convinced as soon as he stepped into the hall. The glass door looking on to the garden in the rear was wide open, and three of its panes were shattered to pieces. The oilcloth carpeting had been torn up, and large drops of blood were visible on the white marble slabs. At the foot of the staircase appeared a stain larger than the rest, and upon the lower step a splash hideous to behold. Unfitted by nature for such sights, as for the mission he had now to perform, M. Courtois grew faint. Luckily, the idea of his official importance lent him an energy foreign to his character. The more difficult the preliminary examination of this affair seemed, the more determined he was to carry it out with dignity. "Conduct us to the place where you saw the body," said he to Bertaud.

But Papa Plantat intervened. "It would be wiser, I think," he objected, "and more methodical, if we began by going through the house."

"Perhaps—yes—true, that's my own view," said the mayor, grasping at the other's counsel, as a drowning man clings to a straw. And he at once ordered every one to remain waiting in the hall except the corporal and the valet, the latter being required as a guide. "Gendarmes," cried M. Courtois to the men guarding the gate, "see that no one goes out; prevent anybody from entering the house, and, above all, let no one go into the garden."

They then went up-stairs. Drops of blood were sprinkled all along the flight. There was blood also on the balusters and M. Courtois suddenly perceived, with horror, that his own hands were stained. When they had reached the first landing, the mayor enquired of the valet: "Tell me, my friend, did your master and mistress occupy the same bed-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"And where is their room?"

"Through the boudoir there, sir." As he spoke, the valet staggered back terrified, and pointed to the door, on the upper panel of which appeared the imprint of a bloody hand. Drops of perspiration gathered on the mayor's forehead; he too was terrified, and could hardly keep on his legs. Ah! authority involves terrible obligations! Albeit, M. Courtois's dismay was far from being disgraceful cowardice. Even the corporal, an old veteran of the Crimea, hesitated and was visibly moved. M. Plantat alone retained his coolness, and looked at the others as quietly as if he had been at home. "We must proceed," said he, entering the boudoir; whereupon his companions followed him.

There was nothing very unusual in the inner aspect of this apartment—a boudoir hung in blue satin, furnished with a couch and four arm-chairs, upholstered in the same material. Only one of the chairs was overturned; but on proceeding into the bed-room, everything there was found in frightful disorder, the aspect of every article of furniture, of every ornament, seemingly indicating that a terribly merciless struggle had taken place between the murderers and their victims. A small table was overturned in the middle of the apartment and all around it lumps of sugar and fragments of tinted porcelain were scattered over the floor. This sight drew from the valet the remark that his master and mistress must have been taking tea when the murderers assailed them.

The ornaments usually figuring on the mantel-shelf had been thrown on to the floor; the clock, in falling, had stopped at twenty minutes past three. Near the clock lay two lamps; the globes smashed, and the oil spilt all over the carpet. The bed hangings had been torn down, and trailed partly over the bed itself and partly on the floor. Some one must have clutched desperately at these draperies. All the furniture was overturned. The chair coverings had been hacked with knives, and in places the stuffing protruded. The bureau moreover had been broken open; the dislocated writing-slide hung by one hinge; and the drawers were open and empty. On all sides, stains of blood were visible—on the carpet, the furniture, the window curtains, and above all on those of the bed. "Poor wretches!" stammered the mayor in a tremor, "they were murdered here."

While he, the valet, and the corporal stood looking on, seemingly appalled, impassive M. Plantat made a minute examination of the apartment, peeping into every corner, and jotting down frequent notes on his tablets. "Come," said he at length, "let us go into the other rooms."

At each fresh step similar disorder was encountered. Some band of furious maniacs or frenzied criminals must have passed the night in the house. The library, had been turned quite topsy-turvy. The murderers had not taken the trouble to force the locks, but had gone to work with a hatchet. They had evidently had no fear of being overheard; for the tremendous blows by which the massive oak writing-desk had been smashed to pieces, must have resounded throughout the château. Neither drawing nor smoking-room had been respected. Couches, chairs, and hangings, were slashed and pierced as if they had been assailed with swords and sabres. Two spare bedrooms were also in perfect confusion. In the first room on the second floor the exploring party found a hatchet, which the valet recognised as belonging to the house, having been usually employed for splitting wood. It lay beside a cupboard which had been assaulted although not forced open. "Do you understand it now?" said the mayor to M. Plantat. "The assassins were in force, that's clear. After the murder, they scattered through the château, looking for the money they knew was on the premises. One of them was engaged in breaking the door of this cupboard, when the others found the money on the floor below; they called him; he hastened down, and thinking all further search useless, left the hatchet here."

"Ay," quoth the corporal, "I see it all, as plainly as if I had been here myself."

The ground floor, which the searchers next visited, had not been damaged; but in the dining-room the remains of an improvised supper were found. After perpetrating their crime and securing the money, the murderers had evidently desired to refresh themselves. They had eaten up all the cold meat left in the pantry, and on the table stood eight empty bottles and five glasses—apparent proofs of their carouse.

"There were five of them," said the mayor, who by force of will, had now recovered his self-possession. "Before going to view the bodies," added he, "I will send word to the Public Prosecutor at Corbeil. In an hour an examining magistrate can be here to finish our painful task."

A gendarme having been instructed to harness the count's dogcart and drive to the prosecution office, M. Courtois and M. Plantat, followed by the corporal, the valet, and the two Bertauds, turned towards the river. Nearly a couple of hundred yards intervene between the château of Val-feuillu and the Seine, the space being mainly occupied by a lawn, interspersed with flower beds, and crossed by two paths conducting to the river bank. But the murderers had not followed either of these paths. Making a short cut, they had got straight across the grass, which was bent and trampled down as if some heavy load had been dragged over it. Perceiving something red lying half-way across the sward, M. Plantat went forward and picked up a slipper, which the valet recognised as belonging to the count. Further on the party found a white silk neckcloth, stained with blood, which the valet also declared he had often seen his master wearing. At last they reached the river bank, and hard by the willows from one of which Philippe had intended cutting off a branch, they found the countess's body still lying undisturbed. The sandy soil bore the deep impress of feet seeking a firm support; and everything indicated that a supreme struggle had been engaged in. M. Courtois realised all the importance of these traces. Bidding the others keep back he and M. Plantat approached the corpse together. Although the face could not be distinguished, they both recognised the countess, having previously seen her in this same grey robe, with blue trimmings. Now, how came she there? The mayor thought that escaping

from her murderers, she had fled wildly. They had pursued her, and reached her at the river bank where she had fallen to rise no more. This version explained the traces of the struggle, and it must have been the count's body the assassins had dragged across the lawn. M. Courtois talked excitedly, trying to impose his ideas on M. Plantat. But the latter hardly listened, being seemingly wrapt in thought. His answers were of the briefest kind—"yes," "no," or "perhaps." However, the mayor persevered in his exertions, walking to and fro, measuring steps, and minutely scrutinizing the ground. Hereabouts there was not more than a foot of water in the stream; its course being obstructed by a bank of mud from which sprung sundry water lilies and clumps of flags. The water was very clear, and there was no current; the slippery slimy mire beneath could be distinctly seen. M. Courtois had proceeded thus far in his investigations, when seized with a sudden idea, he bid the elder Bertaud approach, adding: "You say you saw the body from your boat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is your boat?"

"There, hauled up beside that field."

"Well, take us to it."

This order plainly affected the old poacher, who trembled and turned perceptibly pale, although his rough skin was deeply tanned by sun and storm. He was seen to look threateningly towards his son. "Well, let's go," he said at last.

The mayor and the magistrate could not be expected to spring across the wide ditch, which the Bertauds had leapt, unbeknown to the authorities a few hours earlier, and the party was about to go round by way of the house, when the valet suggested fetching a plank so as to bridge the ditch and thus save time. He quickly procured one, and was on the point of adjusting it, when the mayor espying the imprints left by the Bertauds during their adventure that morning, bade him pause: "What is this?" said M. Courtois. "Some one has plainly been crossing here, and not long ago; for the footprints are quite fresh." Then after a brief examination of the traces, he ordered the plank to be placed further off. At length, on reaching the boat, he asked Jean if that were the craft in which he and his son had gone to take up their nets that morning?

Old Bertaud replied, "It was."

"Well, then," resumed the mayor, "what tackle did you use? your net here is quite dry; this boat-hook and those oars haven't been wet for twenty-four hours." And noticing the poacher's anxious manner, he added, "Do you persist in what you say, Bertaud?"

"Certainly."

"And you, Philippe?"

"Sir," stammered the young man, "we have told the truth."

"Really!" rejoined M. Courtois, in an ironical tone. "Then you will explain to the proper authorities, how it was you could see anything from a boat you hadn't even unmoored. It will be proved, also, that with the body placed as it is, it cannot even be seen from the middle of the river. Then you will still have to tell us the meaning of those foot-prints which lead from your boat to the spot where the ditch has plainly been crossed several times and by different persons." The two Bertauds hung their heads. "Corporal," ordered the mayor, "arrest these two men in the name of the law, and prevent all communication between them."

Philippe seemed overwhelmed; but old Jean, contented himself with

shrugging his shoulders and muttering to his son : " Well, you would have it so, wouldn't you ? "

While the corporal led the two poachers away, to hand them over to the custody of his subordinates, the mayor and M. Plantat returned into the park. " With all this," muttered M. Courtois, " there are no traces of the count."

It was now necessary to remove Madame de Trémorrel's body. The mayor sent for two more planks, and these being placed on the ground with infinite precaution, enabled the assistants to remove the corpse without effacing the footmarks which the public prosecutor's delegate would require to see. It was almost impossible to recognise the once beautiful Countess de Trémorrel in these soiled and disfigured remains. The deceased had received more than twenty wounds with a knife, many of them on the face, and she must also have been struck with a stick, or a hammer. In addition she had plainly been dragged along by her feet and hair, and her clothes moreover were in tatters. In her left hand she grasped a strip of common cloth, torn, probably, from the garments of one of her assailants. The mayor, on viewing this shocking sight, again felt his legs fail him, and had to lean on the impassive Plantat's arm for support. The servants summoned by the valet to assist in carrying the body were loud in their lamentations, and imprecations. " The wretches ! " they cried. " So kind a mistress ! So good a lady ! " It was evident from their distress that M. and Madame de Trémorrel were highly popular among their people.

The countess's body had just been laid on the billiard-table, on the ground floor, when the investigating magistrate, delegated by the public prosecutor, and a physician from Corbeil were announced. " At last ! " exclaimed the mayor with an air of relief ; and in a lower tone he added : " The finest medals have their reverse." For the first time in his life, he seriously cursed his ambition, and regretted being the most important personage in Orcival.

III.

THE examining magistrate of the Corbeil law-court, M. Antoine Domini, was already a man of mark, and has since been called to higher functions. He was at that epoch forty years of age, and prepossessing in appearance although his expressive features were marred by a constant habit of striving to look too solemn. Considering his office to be a species of pontificate, he spent his life incessantly sacrificing at the altar of the law, spurning the most simple relaxation, and the most innocent pleasures as unworthy of his sphere. He lived alone, seldom showing himself abroad and rarely receiving his friends. He feared lest his judicial prestige should suffer by even a fugitive exhibition of some common-place human weakness ; and this same dread had also deterred him from marrying, though in his inner self he felt the need of domestic joys and comforts. In all places, and at all seasons, he invariably figured as a magistrate—as the all but fanatic representative of what he thought the most august institution on earth. Nature had given him a gay disposition, and yet he would lock his door, and make sure he was quite alone before venturing to laugh. He was also naturally witty ; but if a bright sally escaped him, you may be sure he repented of it. He devoted body and soul to his vocation ; and so far as his powers went, no one could discharge his duties more conscientiously. He was invariably inflexible ; and in his eyes it was perfectly monstrous, to

argue over a clause of the code. The law spoke, and that sufficed ; he closed his eyes, deafened his ears, and implicitly obeyed the statutes. On taking a legal investigation in hand, he seldom slept until it was concluded, and employed every means in his power to arrive at the truth. And yet, as an examining magistrate, he was not seen to the best advantage. His talents were better fitted for other branches of judicial office. The idea of tricking a prisoner was repugnant to him ; he considered it debasing to lay a snare for a rogue ; and, moreover, he was obstinate—obstinate to foolishness, sometimes to absurdity, even to denying the existence of the sun at mid-day.

The mayor and papa Plantat hastened to greet M. Domini, who, having bowed to them as gravely as if he had not known them, introduced his companion (a man of sixty or thereabouts) by the name of "Dr. Gendron." Papa Plantat shook hands with the latter, and the mayor smiled on him graciously, for Dr. Gendron was well-known in those parts ; being indeed a local celebrity. And yet, although he loved his profession, and when practising did so with energetic fervour, the doctor owed well-nigh as much of his reputation to his manners as to his science. He was certainly an eccentric character. He visited his patients from five to nine in the morning—and those whom these matutinal hours inconvenienced, had, as a rule, no other resource than to dispense with his services. After nine o'clock the doctor was not to be had. He was working for himself, in his laboratory, or in his cellar. It was reported that he was experimenting in practical chemistry, with the view of increasing his income, which already amounted to twenty thousand francs. Far from denying the rumour, he admitted that he was engaged on poisons, perfecting in fact an invention which would permit the detection of all those alkaloids, which up to that time had escaped analysis. If his friends reproached him, even jokingly, for sending sick people away in the afternoon, he grew red with rage. "Eh !" he answered, "what do you complain of ? I am a doctor four hours a day. Scarcely a quarter of my patients pay me, so you see I give humanity, which as a rule I despise, three hours gratis per diem. Let each of you only do as much."

As the mayor conducted the new-comers into the drawing-room, where he proposed installing himself to write down a report of his examination, he treated M. Domini to sundry grandiloquent phrases anent the indelible stain which this abominable crime would leave on the hitherto unblemished reputation of Orcival ; and on the magistrate remarking that he as yet knew little or nothing of the affair he proceeded to recount the recent investigation at great length. He dwelt especially on the excellent precautions which his own sagacity had prompted him to take, relating how the conduct of the Bertauds had at first awakened his suspicions ; how he had detected them at least in a point-blank lie ; and, finally, how he had determined to arrest them. He spoke standing with his head thrown back, and in a highly emphatic tone. The pleasure of speaking partially rewarded him for his recent distress. "And now," he at last concluded, "I have just ordered a minute search, so that we shall no doubt soon find the count's body as well. All the people of the house with five extra men selected by me are searching the park. If their efforts are not successful I have some fishermen who will drag the river."

M. Domini only nodded his head from time to time, as a sign of approbation. He was studying the particulars, weighing the points brought before him, and preparing in his mind a plan of proceeding. "You have acted

wisely," said he, at last. "I think with you that we are on the trace of the criminals. These poachers, or the gardener who has disappeared, have probably something to do with this abominable crime."

M. Plantat, merely a local magistrate or justice of the peace, was altogether a far less important functionary than M. Domini. But although he refrained from interrupting the latter he could scarcely succeed in hiding his impatience. At length, however, he ventured to speak. "The misfortune is," said he, "that if Guespin is guilty he won't be such a fool as to show himself here."

"Oh, we'll find him," rejoined M. Domini. "Before leaving Corbeil, I sent a telegram to the prefecture of police in Paris, to ask for a detective who will no doubt be here shortly."

"While waiting," suggested the mayor, "perhaps you would like to see the scene of the crime?"

M. Domini reflected. "In fact, no," said he; "we will see nothing till the detective arrives. But I must have some information concerning the Count and Countess de Trémoré."

The mayor again triumphed. Here was another opportunity for a peroration. "Oh, I can give it you," answered he quickly, "better than anybody. Ever since they lived here I have been, I may say, one of their best friends. Ah, sir, what charming people! so affable, friendly, and kind-hearted." And at the remembrance of his friends' good qualities, M. Courtois felt a choking sensation in the throat. "The Count de Trémoré," he resumed, "must have been thirty-four years old—a handsome and a witty nobleman. It is true he had at times fits of melancholy, during which he kept away from his friends, but ordinarily he was most affable, polite, and obliging; he knew so well how to retain his rank without being haughty, that everybody here esteemed and loved him."

"And the countess?" asked the examining magistrate.

"An angel, sir, an angel on earth! Poor lady! You will soon see her remains, but she is so disfigured you would never guess that her beauty made her the queen of the district."

"Were they rich?"

"Yes; they must have had between them an income of a hundred thousand francs—in fact, yes, much more; for during the last four or five months the count, who hadn't poor Sauvresy's bucolic tastes, sold a part of the property and bought scrip."

"Had they been married long?"

M. Courtois scratched his head; his favourite appeal to memory. "Faith," he answered, "it was in September last year; just six months ago. I married them myself. Poor Sauvresy had been dead a year."

The examining magistrate looked up from his notes with surprise.

"Who is this Sauvresy you speak about?" he asked.

Papa Plantat, who had been furiously biting his nails in a corner, apparently unconcerned in what was going on, now rose abruptly to his feet. "M. Sauvresy," said he, "was Madame de Trémoré's first husband. My friend Courtois has omitted this fact."

"Oh!" said the mayor, in a wounded tone, "it seems to me that under the circumstances—"

"Excuse me," interrupted M. Domini. "It is a detail which may have its utility, although apparently foreign to the case, and, at first sight, insignificant."

"Hum!" grunted papa Plantat, "Insignificant—foreign to it!"

His tone and manner were so strange, that M. Domini looked at him inquiringly. "Do you share the mayor's opinion regarding the Trémorels?" he asked.

Plantat shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't any opinions," he answered: "I live alone—see nobody; don't disturb myself about anything. But—"

"It seems to me," said M. Courtois, "that nobody should be better acquainted with people who were my friends than myself."

"Ay, but you tell your story clumsily," dryly rejoined M. Plantat.

The examining magistrate hereupon pressed his colleague to explain himself; and to the great scandal of the mayor, who was thus relegated to the background, M. Plantat then sketched as follows the count's and countess's biography:—"The Countess de Trémorel, *née* Bertha Lechaillu, was," said he, "the daughter of a poor village schoolmaster. At eighteen her beauty was famous for three leagues round about, but as her big blue eyes and her golden ringlets were her only dowry, very few serious suitors presented themselves. Bertha, by her family's advice, had already resigned herself to become a governess, when the owner of one of the finest estates in the neighbourhood happened to see her, and fell in love with her. Clement Sauvresy was just thirty; his parents were dead, and he possessed an income of nearly a hundred thousand francs, derived from lands free of all incumbrance. He had clearly the best right in the world to choose a wife to his taste. He did not hesitate. He asked for Bertha's hand, won it, and a month afterwards married her, to the great scandal of the neighbouring landowners, who remarked: 'What folly! what good is there in being rich, if not to increase one's fortune by a wealthy marriage!' A month or so before the wedding, Sauvresy set men to work at Valfeuilu, and soon spent a trifle of ninety thousand francs in repairs and furniture. The newly-married pair came here to spend their honeymoon, and were so well contented that they established themselves permanently at Valfeuilu, to very general satisfaction at Orcival. It seemed as if Bertha was one of those persons who are born especially to marry millionaires. She passed without the least awkwardness or embarrassment, from the humble school-room where she had assisted her father to the splendid drawing-room of Valfeuilu. And when she did the honours of her château to all the neighbouring aristocracy and gentry, it seemed as though she had never done anything else in her life. Still she knew how to remain simple, approachable, and modest, whilst taking the tone of the highest society. She was beloved."

"But it appears to me," interrupted the mayor, "that I said precisely the same thing, and it was really not worth while—"

A gesture from M. Domini closed the ruffled functionary's mouth, and M. Plantat continued: "Sauvresy was also liked; for his was one of those golden hearts which have no idea of evil. He was one of those men with a robust faith and obstinate illusions, which doubt never disturbs—one of those who thoroughly confide in the sincerity of their friends, in the love of the woman they have chosen. This new household ought to have been happy; it was so. Bertha adored her husband, who, before saying a word of love to her, had offered her his hand. Sauvresy on his side literally worshipped his wife. They lived in good style at Valfeuilu. They received a great deal, and during the autumn all the spare rooms were filled with guests. Sauvresy had been married two years, when one evening he returned from Paris with one of his old friends, a college chum whom he had often spoken of—Count Hector de Trémorel. The count was only to have remained a short time at Valfeuilu; but weeks passed and then months,

and he was still there. It was not surprising. Heetor had been leading a very fast life indeed. He had scattered an immense fortune to the winds, and the relative retirement of Valfeuilu came to him as a relief. At first folks said to him, 'You will soon have enough of the country.' But he only smiled without replying. It was then thought, and rightly, perhaps, that being in straightened means he scarcely cared to parade his poverty before those who had witnessed his splendour. He seldom absented himself from Orcival, and then only to go to Corbeil, almost always on foot. He frequented the Belle Image hotel there, where he was in the habit of meeting a young woman who came from Paris. They usually spent the afternoon together, and separated when the last train left."

"Well!" growled the mayor, "It seems to me that our friend, M. Plantat, is pretty well informed, for a man who lives alone, who sees nobody, and who wouldn't for worlds have anything to do with other people's business!" M. Courtois was evidently jealous; and no wonder, for he, the first personage in the place, had been absolutely ignorant of these meetings. His ill humour was increasing, when Dr. Gendron remarked: "Pooh! all Corbeil prated about that at the time."

M. Plantat's lips moved as if about to say, "I know other things besides." But recovering himself, he proceeded with his story. "Count Heetor's stay at Valfeuilu made no change in the style of life at the château. It was as if M. and Madame Sauvresy had a brother living with them, that was all. Sauvresy, however, about this time went frequently to Paris, where, as everybody knew, he was engaged in arranging his friend's affairs. A year went by, and everything was proceeding happily, when, alas! one evening, on returning from shooting, Sauvresy became so ill that he had to take to his bed. A doctor was sent for; inflammation of the lungs had set in. Sauvresy was young, as vigorous as an oak; and his condition did not at first cause anxiety. In fact, a fortnight afterwards he was up and about again. But he was imprudent, and had a relapse. He again nearly recovered; a week afterwards there was yet another relapse, and this time so serious a one that it was feared his illness would finish fatally. During this long sickness, Bertha's love and Trémoré's affection for Sauvresy were conspicuous. Never was an invalid tended with such solicitude, comforted with so many proofs of devotion. His wife and his friend were always by his side, day and night. He had hours of suffering, but never a second's weariness. He said to everyone who went to see him, that he had come to bless his illness, remarking at times, 'If I had not fallen ill, I should never have known how much I was loved.'"

"He said the same thing to me," interrupted the mayor, "more than a hundred times. He also said so to Madame Courtois, to Laurence, my oldest daughter—"

"No doubt," continued M. Plantat. "However Sauvresy's distemper proved more than a match for the most skilful physicians and the most constant care. He said he did not suffer much, but he faded away perceptibly, until he became no more than the shadow of his former self. At last, one night, towards two or three o'clock, he died in the arms of his wife and his friend. Up to the last moment, he had retained the full exercise of his faculties, and less than an hour before expiring, he had all the servants of the château summoned to his room. When they were all gathered about the bedside, he took his wife's hand, placed it in the Count de Trémoré's and made them swear to marry each other when he was no more. Bertha and Heetor began to protest, but he insisted in such a manner as to compel them to

consent, declaring that their refusal would embitter his last moments. The idea of this marriage between his widow and his friend seems, indeed, to have singularly pre-occupied his mind. In the preamble of his will, dictated the night before his death, to M. Bury, notary at Orcival, he formally states that this union is his dearest wish, being certain that it will prove a happy one, and feeling confident he will be piously remembered."

"Had M. and Madame Sauvresy no children?" asked the examining magistrate.

"No," answered the mayor.

"The count and the young widow," continued M. Plantat, "shewed intense grief. M. de Trémoré seemed absolutely desperate, and acted like a madman. The countess shut herself up, refusing to see even her best friends, those whom she positively loved. When the count and Madame Bertha were seen again, they were scarcely to be recognised, so greatly had they changed. M. Hector seemed to have grown twenty years older. The profound sorrow they showed for a man who well deserved it, was generally admired, and there was great curiosity as to whether they would keep the promise they had made beside Sauvresy's death-bed."

The examining magistrate stopped M. Plantat with a gesture. "Do you know," asked he, "whether those meetings at the 'Belle-Image hotel,' had ceased?"

"I suppose so; I think so."

"I am almost sure of it," remarked Dr. Gendron. "They know everything at Corbeil—and I've often heard it said that there was a heated explanation between M. de Trémoré and the pretty Parisienne. After this quarrel, they were no longer seen at the 'Belle-Image.'"

Papa Plantat smiled. "Melun is not at the end of the world," said he, "and there are hotels at Melun. With a good horse, too, one may soon reach Fontainebleau, Versailles, or even Paris. Madame de Trémoré might have been jealous; at all events, her husband had some first rate trotters in his stables."

Was M. Plantat giving an absolutely disinterested opinion, or were his words an insinuation? The examining magistrate scrutinised him attentively, but his features told no stories. M. Domini could only conclude that his colleague had spoken in all simplicity. He begged him to continue.

"Ah!" said M. Plantat, "there's nothing eternal on earth, not even grief. I know it better than anybody. Soon, after the first despair, the Count and Madame Bertha only showed reasonable sadness, subsiding into soft melancholy, and eventually, a year after Sauvresy's death, M. de Trémoré married the young widow."

During this long narrative the mayor had frequently betrayed his impatience. Not being able to hold in any longer, he now exclaimed: "Those particulars are no doubt exact, but I question whether they have advanced us a step in the task of discovering the count and countess's murderers."

On hearing these words, M. Plantat, gave the examining magistrate a deep cager look, as if anxious to fathom his thoughts.

"These details were indispensable," rejoined M. Domini, "and they are very clear. Those meetings at the hotel struck me; jealousy leads women to extremities." He paused abruptly, seeking, no doubt, for some connection between the pretty Parisienne and the murderers; then speaking again, he said: "Now that I know the Trémorés as if I had lived with them intimately, let us proceed to the actual facts."

M. Plantat's bright eyes at once grew dim; he opened his lips as if to

speak ; but suddenly determined to keep his peace. Of the lookers-on, the doctor, who had not ceased studying the ex-notary's demeanour, alone remarked the sudden change that came over his features.

"It only remains," repeated M. Domini, "to know how the new couple lived."

M. Courtois's dignity required him to anticipate M. Plantat. "You ask how the new couple lived," said he hastily ; "they lived on the best of terms ; nobody knows better about that than myself, for I was most intimate with them. The recollection of poor Sauvresy was like a bond of happiness between them ; if they were such friends with me, it was because I so often talked of him. There was never a cloud, never a cross word between them. Hector—I called him so, familiarly, poor, dear count—gave his wife a lover's tender attention and delicate care, such as I fear most married people soon dispense with."

"And the countess ?" asked M. Plantat, in a tone too marked not to be ironical.

"Bertha ?" replied the worthy mayor, "she permitted me to call her so paternally, why, I have quoted her many and many a time as an example and model to Madame Courtois. She was worthy both of Hector and Sauvresy, and they were the two most worthy men I have ever met !" Then, perceiving that his enthusiasm somewhat surprised his hearers, he added more softly, "I have my reasons for expressing myself in this fashion ; and I do not hesitate to do so before men of your professions and character. When Sauvresy was alive he did me a great service, at the time when I was compelled to accept the mayoralty. As for Hector, I knew well enough that he had bid good-bye to all the dissipation of youth, and fancied he was not quite indifferent to my eldest daughter Laurence. I even entertained an idea of a marriage between them, for if Count Hector had a great name, I on my side could give my daughter a dowry sufficient to gild any escutcheon. However, the events you have been told of modified my plans."

The mayor would have gone on for hours singing the Trémorels' praises and those of his own family, if the examining magistrate had not interposed. "Well, that will do," said he. "Now it seems to me—" But he proceeded no further, for at this moment a loud uproar—a babel of voices mingled as it were with the sounds of a scuffle—was heard in the hall. The occupants of the drawing-room hastily rose to their feet. "Oh, I know what it is," exclaimed the mayor : "They have just found Count de Trémorel's body."

IV.

M. COURTOIS was mistaken ; for on opening the drawing-room door, in lieu of finding himself face to face with the count's body, he perceived a man struggling, with an energy wonderful for one of his slim build, with a gendarme and a servant. The scuffle must have already lasted sometime, for the stranger's clothes were in a pitiable condition. His coat, plainly a new one, was torn in several places, his neck-tie was in shreds, and his collar button had been wrenched off, so that his bare chest could be plainly seen. The hall and the courtyard beyond resounded with the frantic shouts of the lookers-on, whom the gendarmes had great difficulty in keeping back. The news of the murders at Valfeuillu had already spread through Orcival, and at least a hundred of the villagers were gathered round about the front gate eager to hear, and above all to see what was going on. "That's the

rascal!" screamed the mob, "Guespin, the murderer! Look there he is! Kill him, kill him, he deserves it!"

In the meanwhile, the new-comer continued struggling, although plainly appalled by the clamours of the crowd. "Help!" cried he in a hoarse voice. "Leave me alone. I am innocent!" The drawing-room communicated with the hall by means of a double door, only one wing of which had been opened. Guespin wedged himself into a corner against the other panel, and his captors were unable to force him forward. It was easy enough for the mayor to shout: "Push him, push him!" but the gendarme and the servant found it a difficult task to carry the order into effect; for Guespin's fright seemed to arm him with tremendous strength. Dr. Gendron, however, suddenly hit on the idea of drawing back the bolts that secured the door-wing against which Guespin was entrenched, and support abruptly failing him, he fell, or rather rolled, to the foot of the table, where the examining magistrate was seated. He was quickly on his feet again, and eagerly sought for some mode of egress. But escape was impossible, for windows and doorways alike were crowded with lookers-on. He fell into a chair in a paroxysm of terror, with livid face, white lips, and bloodshot eyes. His jaws moved convulsively, as if he were seeking for saliva to moisten his burning tongue; his wild stare betrayed the greatest distress, and his frame was shaken with constant spasms. The sight was so terrible that the mayor, profiting of the occasion to preach his townsmen a lesson, turned towards them, and, pointing to Guespin, tragically exclaimed: "Behold the consequences of crime!"

M. Domini and the doctor looked up in surprise, while Papa Plantat ironically muttered: "If he is guilty, why on earth has he come back?"

The corporal had meanwhile stationed himself beside Guespin, scarcely thinking it prudent to leave him alone with unarmed men. But the gardener was no longer to be feared. A reaction had set in, and his energy being exhausted, he was seized with a fit of prostration, such as occurs in certain stages of brain fever. While he remained in this condition, the corporal related what had happened. "Some of the servants of the château," said he, "were chatting near the gate with various acquaintances, and Guespin's disappearance last night was just being discussed, when all of a sudden he was seen coming along in the distance, singing and staggering as if he were drunk."

"Was he really drunk?" asked M. Domini.

"Very much so," rejoined the corporal.

"Then we have to thank his liquor for having caught him."

"On perceiving the scoundrel," continued the corporal, who was seemingly convinced of Guespin's guilt, "François, the count's valet, and Baptiste, the mayor's servant, who were there, ran forward and collared him. He was so tipsy that he at first thought they were fooling with him; but on seeing my men he seemed to guess the truth. And when one of the women cried out, 'You brigand, it was you who murdered the count and countess last night!' he turned as pale as death. Directly afterwards, however, he began to struggle tremendously, and nearly escaped. Ah! he's a strong rogue, though he does not look like it."

"And did he say nothing?" asked Plantat.

"Not a word; but he ground his teeth with rage. I've since searched him, and found in his pockets a handkerchief, a pruning-knife, two small keys, a scrap of paper covered with figures, and the card of an establishment in Paris called 'Vulcan's Forges' where they sell tools and cutlery.

But that's not all—" The corporal paused, took a step forward, and eyed his auditors mysteriously; he was preparing his effect. "That's not all," he continued. "While they were bringing him along through the courtyard, he tried to get rid of his pocket-book; but fortunately I had my eyes open, and saw his dodge. He threw it among the flowers near the door, where I picked it up. It contains a hundred-franc note, three napoleons, and seven francs in silver. Yesterday the rascal hadn't a sou—"

"How do you know that?" asked M. Domini.

"Why, sir, because he borrowed twenty-five francs from François, the valet, who has told me of it, pretending that he wanted some money to pay his share of the wedding expenses."

"Tell François to come here," said the examining magistrate. "Now," continued he, when the valet presented himself, "do you know whether Guespin had any money yesterday?"

"He had so little, sir," François promptly answered, "that during the day he asked me to lend him twenty-five francs, as otherwise he could not go to the wedding, not having even enough to pay his railway fare."

"But he might have some savings—a hundred franc-note, for instance, which he didn't wish to change."

François shook his head with an incredulous smile. "Guespin isn't the man to have any savings," said he. "Women and cards exhaust all his wages. Why, only last week, the landlord of the Café du Commerce came here and made a row about what he owed him, and threatened to go and complain to the count." The valet paused, and then noticing the effect of what he had said, hastily added. "I've no ill-will whatever against Guespin; and until to-day I had always thought him a clever fellow, though rather too much of a practical joker; he was, perhaps too, a little proud, but considering his bringing-up—"

"You may go," suddenly exclaimed the magistrate, cutting this disquisition short, in a tone which left the valet no other alternative than to retire.

In the meanwhile Guespin had gradually come to himself. M. Domini, papa Plantat, and the mayor carefully scrutinized his features which he had not the self-possession to compose, while the doctor held his pulse and counted its beating.

"Remorse and fear of punishment," muttered the mayor with the air of an oracle.

"Innocence, and the impossibility of proving it," retorted Plantat in a low tone.

M. Domini heard both these exclamations, though he did not appear to notice them. His opinion was not yet formed, and he did not wish anyone to anticipate what it would be.

"Are you better, now?" asked Doctor Gendron, of Guespin, who nodding affirmatively looked anxiously round him, passed his hand over his eyes and stammered: "Something to drink!"

A glass of water was brought him, and he drank it at one draught, with an expression of intense satisfaction. "Are you now in a fit state to answer me?" asked the examining magistrate.

Guespin rose to his feet, staggering at first, but finally drawing himself erect. His hands no longer trembled so violently, colour was returning to his cheeks and he tried to arrange the disorder of his clothes, while listening to M. Domini, who spoke as follows: "I suppose you know what has occurred during the night. The Count and Countess de Trémoré have

been murdered. You went away last evening with all the other servants ; you left them at the Lyons station at about nine o'clock ; and you have just come back alone. Where have you passed the night ? ”

Guespin hung his head and remained silent. “ That is not all,” continued M. Domini, “ we know that you had no money yesterday ; one of your fellow-servants has told us so ; but to-day a hundred and sixty-seven francs have been found in your pocket-book. Now, where did you get this money from ? ” Still no answer. The gardener’s lips parted as if he wished to speak, but some sudden thought evidently checked him, and he remained silent. “ In addition,” quietly continued the magistrate, “ what is the meaning of this card found in your pocket—the card of a firm dealing in tools and cutlery ? ”

“ I am innocent,” stammered Guespin after a pause.

“ I have not yet accused you,” quickly rejoined the magistrate. “ By the way, you perhaps knew that the count received a considerable sum of money yesterday ? ”

Guespin’s lips curved into a bitter smile as he answered, “ I know well enough that everything is against me.”

Profound silence followed. The doctor, the mayor, and Plantat were looking on with keen curiosity. These merciless duels between the representative of the law and a man suspected of a crime absorb and fascinate those who witness them. The questions may seem trifling and the answers irrelevant ; but both have at times hidden meanings of great significance. The merest gesture, the least change of expression, a fugitive glance, a momentary variation of tone, all have their weight, and enlighten observers as to the feelings of the combatants. M. Domini’s imperturbable coolness was however quite disheartening for those who wished to divine his thoughts. “ Let us see,” said he after a pause : “ where did you pass the night ? How did you get this money ? And what does this address mean ? ”

“ Eh ? ” cried Guespin, in a powerless rage, “ If I told you, you would not believe me.” Then, seeing that the magistrate was about to ask him another question, he hurried on : “ No ; you wouldn’t believe me. Do men like you believe men like me ? I have a past, you know, antecedents, as you would say. The past ! that’s what they always throw in my face, as if the future depended on the past. Well, yes ; it’s true, I’m a gambler, a drunkard, an idler, but what of that ? It’s quite true I’ve been in the dock, and condemned for poaching besides, but what does that prove ? I’ve wasted my life, no doubt, but at least I’ve only wronged myself ! My past ! Haven’t I made up for it ? ” Guespin was quite self-possessed, and expressed himself with a savage energy well calculated to impress his hearers. “ I didn’t always serve others,” he continued ; “ my father was in easy circumstances—almost rich. He was a florist near Saumur, in a large way of business, and passed for one of the best in that part of the country. I was well educated and began to study the law when I was sixteen. Four years later people thought me a talented young fellow, but, unhappily for me, my father died. He left me landed property worth a hundred thousand francs which I sold for sixty thousand, and then went to Paris, like a fool. I had a kind of fever—I was mad on amusing myself, and I thought my sixty thousand francs would last for ever.” Guespin paused ; a thousand memories rushed into his mind, and he muttered : “ After all, those were good times. My sixty thousand francs,” he resumed, “ held out eight years, and then, though I hadn’t a sou left, I wanted to live on in just the same style. You understand me, don’t you ? But

one night the police arrested me, and I was 'detained' for six months. You will find the records of the affair at the Préfecture, and you'll learn that on leaving prison I led a life of misery—being reduced to associate with the worst and lowest outcasts of Paris—that's the truth."

The mayor was filled with consternation. "Good heavens," murmured he, "what an audacious, cynical rascal! and to think one's liable at any time to admit such servants into one's house!" M. Domini held his peace. He knew that Guespin was in such a state that, under the impulse of passion, he might betray his innermost thoughts. "But there's one thing," continued the gardener, "that your police records won't tell you; that I grew disgusted with this abject life, and attempted suicide. They won't tell you anything of my desperate resolves, repentance, and relapses. At last I was able to reform a bit. I got hold of some work; and, after serving in four situations, I was engaged here. I found myself fairly well off, though it's true I always spent my month's wages in advance, but what would you have? However, just ask if any one here has ever had to complain of me."

Among the police it is an axiom that those criminals, who have had a certain degree of education, and enjoyed some good fortune, are the most dangerous, and applying this theory to Guespin those who listened to him decided that he must be a most redoubtable rascal indeed. While he paused, exhausted by excitement, and wiped his face covered with perspiration, M. Domini, who had not lost sight of his plan of attack, exclaimed: "All this is very interesting no doubt, but we will return to your confession at the proper time and place. At present the question is, how you spent your night, and where you got this money."

The magistrate's persistency seemingly exasperated Guespin. "Eh!" cried he, "what do you want me to answer? The truth? You wouldn't credit it. So as well say nothing. It's a fatality."

"I warn you for your own sake," resumed M. Domini, "that if you persist in refusing to answer, appearances are such that I must have you arrested as an accomplice in these murders."

This threat seemed to have a remarkable effect on Guespin, whose hither-to flashing eyes suddenly filled with tears. His energy was exhausted, and he fell on to his knees, exclaiming; "Don't arrest me, sir, I beg you. I swear I'm innocent, I swear it!"

"Speak, then."

"You wish it," said Guespin, rising; and then abruptly changing his tone he added. "No, I won't, I can't speak, only one man could have saved me—the count—and he's dead. I'm innocent; and yet if the guilty parties are not found, I'm lost. Everything is against me. I know it only too well, so do what you like with me; I won't say another word."

The examining magistrate did not seem surprised at this determination; he contented himself with quietly replying: "You will have time to reflect; only, when you have reflected, I shan't have the same confidence in what you may say, as I should have at present. Perhaps," continued he in a more emphatic voice, "you were only indirectly concerned in this crime; if so—"

"Neither indirectly nor directly," interrupted Guespin, "Ah! what misery! To be innocent, and yet unable to defend myself."

"Since such is the case," rejoined M. Domini, "you won't object to be placed in the presence of Madame de Trémor's remains?"

The prisoner did not seem at all affected by this threat. He was led into the billiard room, where the countess's corpse was lying, and as he looked at the body with a cold, calm eye, he simply said: "She's happier than I

am. She's dead and suffers no longer ; while I am accused of killing her, though I'm not guilty."

M. Domini made one more effort to wring an explanation from the prisoner. "Come, Guespin," said he, "if you know anything at all about this crime, speak out. If you know the murderers, name them. Try and deserve some indulgence by showing frankness and repentance."

Guespin made a gesture as if he had resigned himself to persecution. "By all I hold most sacred," he answered, "I'm innocent. And yet I see plain enough that if the murderer is not found, I'm lost."

By degrees M. Domini had formed an opinion. The great difficulty in enquiries of this kind is to detect at once the main thread in the tangled skein, the thread which will lead to the truth through all the mazes, or rather, through all the devices imagined by the culprits. Now M. Domini's conviction was that he held this precious thread in the person of Guespin, and he knew moreover that the apprehension of one culprit usually facilitates the finding of all the others.

Having ordered the corporal to secure Guespin, and not to lose sight of him, he next sent for old Bertaud. This worthy personage was not one of those people who distress themselves. He had so often come into contact with the officers of justice, that one encounter the more was scarcely calculated to disturb him. When he entered the drawing room he smiled on hearing the mayor whisper to M. Domini that his reputation at Orcival was of the worst description ; but on being questioned he gave a very truthful account of what had happened during the morning. He related how he and his son had found the body ; how anxious Philippe had been to warn the authorities ; how he had resisted his son's idea ; and why they had told the mayor a falsehood about seeing the corpse from mid-stream in their boat. Turning himself to the question of his antecedents he remarked, "After all, I'm better than my reputation, and there are many folks who can't say as much. Many things are seen when one goes about at night-time. However, that'll do." He was requested to explain these insinuations, but would not do so. On being asked where and how he had spent the night, he answered, that on leaving a wine-shop at ten o'clock, he went to set some traps in the wood of Mauprévoir ; after which he returned home to bed at about one o'clock in the morning. "By the bye," added he, "there ought to be some game in those traps by this time."

"Can you bring a witness to prove that you went home at one o'clock ?" asked the mayor, thinking of the count's clock, the hands of which pointed to twenty minutes past three.

"Don't know, I'm sure," carelessly replied the poacher, "it's quite likely that my son didn't wake up when I went to bed." Then noticing M. Domini's thoughtful look, he added, "I suspect you are going to imprison me until the murderers are found. If it was winter, I shouldn't complain so much ; for a fellow's well off in a warm cell just then. But now in the shooting season, it's provoking. However, it will prove a good lesson for Philippe ; it'll teach him what it costs to do gentlefolks a service."

"Enough !" interrupted M. Domini, sternly. "Do you know Guespin?"

The sound of the gardener's name suddenly checked the old marauder's careless insolence, and a restless look came into his little grey eyes. "Certainly I do," he answered with some embarrassment, "we have often played cards together in the wine-shops." The old fellow was too shrewd an observer not to notice that his sudden nervousness had surprised his listeners. "Faith, so much the worse !" cried he : "I'll tell you everything. Every

man for himself, eh ? If Guespin's done the deed, it won't blacken him any the more, nor make him any the worse off. I know him, simply because he used to bring me the count's grapes and strawberries; I *suppose* he stole them ; at all events we divided the money they sold for."

Papa Plantat, who a minute previously had been looking the picture of surprise and anxiety, chuckled softly to himself on hearing Bertaud's explanation. The story of the grapes and the strawberries was plainly no mystery for him.

The elder Bertaud's presentiments being realised by an order for his arrest, Philippe was next sent for.

The young fellow was greatly distressed, crying bitterly and constantly repeating, "To accuse me of such a crime, *me !*"

In answer to the magistrate, he gave a truthful account of the morning's adventure, at the same time excusing himself for daring to enter the park. He could not say, however, at what time his father came home the night before, for he himself had gone to bed about nine, and had not woke up till morning. He was acquainted with Guespin from having seen him at his father's several times, and knew that the old man had some transactions with the gardener, though he could not say what they were. He certainly had never spoken four times to Guespin. The result of his examination was that M. Domini ordered him to be set at liberty, not, however, because his innocence was proved, but with the view of facilitating the capture of the other culprits. For supposing the crime to have been committed by several persons, it was well to have one of them free ; the latter could be watched, and would probably betray the whereabouts of his accomplices.

In the meanwhile, the park had been fruitlessly searched for the count's body. The mayor suggested that it had no doubt been thrown into the river, and this was also M. Domini's opinion. Accordingly several fishermen were commissioned to drag the Seine, and commenced operations a short distance above the spot where the countess's corpse had been found. It was now nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, and M. Plantat remarked that, as no one had probably eaten anything during the day, it would perhaps be advisable to take some refreshment, especially if the investigations were to be continued till night-time. This allusion to the trivial requirements of frail humanity greatly disgusted the mayor ; but as the others readily assented, M. Courtois, though not in the least hungry, followed the general example ; and seated round the dining-table, still stained with the wine spilt by the assassins during their carouse, the four investigators partook of an improvised collation.

V.

A GENDARME had been placed at the foot of the staircase, with instructions not to let any one go up to the floor above, but the hall had been left free, and here a motley crowd had by degrees assembled, eager to catch a glimpse of the officers of justice, and, if possible, to overhear their conversation. But whenever the dining-room door opened to admit of a servant entering or leaving, the investigators carefully abstained from saying anything of moment. They had been greatly impressed by this frightful crime and the mystery surrounding it, and even when the door was closed, they exchanged but few comments together. Each silently pondered over the plausibility of his own particular suspicions, and kept his opinion to himself. M.

Domini was, perhaps, the least anxious of the four partakers of this funereal repast. The crime did not seem to him at all likely to disturb his rest at night-time. Robbery had plainly been its motive, and he already had Bertaud and Guespin, two of the murderers, or at least accomplices, in safe custody. While eating he quietly sorted his notes, and marked such passages of the prisoners' examinations as appeared especially significant with a red cross. M. Plantat and Doctor Gendron, who sat side by side, in the meanwhile left off musing and began to talk of the illness to which Sauvresy, the countess's first husband, had succumbed; while M. Courtois listened impatiently to the increasing hubbub in the hall and the courtyard.

The murders having been noised through the neighbourhood, the crowd was every minute growing more compact, and the gendarmes were quite unable to control the excited villagers. It was plainly necessary for the mayor to exercise his authority. "I'm going to make these people listen to reason, and order them off home again," said he to his companions; and then, wiping his mouth, and throwing his tumbled napkin on to a chair, he went out into the hall. His intervention came appropriately enough, for the corporal's injunctions were no longer being heeded. Some inquisitive fellows, more eager than the rest, had outflanked the gendarmes and were forcing an entrance into the garden in the rear. The mayor's appearance did not perhaps particularly intimidate the crowd, but it inspired the soldiery with renewed energy, and the hall was at once cleared, despite all murmurs and resistance. What an opportunity for a speech! M. Courtois was not wanting to the occasion. Believing that his eloquence would, like a cold shower bath, speedily calm the unwonted effervescence of his subjects, he walked forward on to the steps, with his left hand resting between the buttons of his waistcoat, while with the right one he proudly gesticulated, after the fashion attributed by sculptors and portraitists to all great orators. This was the attitude he was wont to assume in presence of the municipal council when, finding unexpected opposition, he undertook to impose his will upon recalcitrant members, and recall them to a proper sense of duty.

Whenever he turned to the right, fragments of his speech reached the occupants of the dining-room; but on wheeling round to the left the wind carried his voice away into space. "Fellow-citizens," he began, "an atrocious crime, unheard of before in our locality, has shocked our peaceful, honest community. I understand and excuse your feverish emotion, your natural indignation. As well as you, my friends—more than you—I cherished and esteemed the noble Count de Trémoré and his virtuous wife. We mourn them together—"

Dr. Gendron and Papa Plantat momentarily lent an ear to the mayor's effusion, and then as his voice suddenly became inaudible, they went on with their own conversation.

"I assure you," said the former, "that the symptoms you describe are not uncommon after pleurisy. The inflammation becomes chronic, and is complicated with pneumonia."

"But nothing," the mayor was now heard to shout, "can justify a curiosity the importunate endeavours of which embarrass the investigators—which is indeed a punishable interference with the action of the law! What has caused this unwonted gathering, this tumult, these rumours, these premature conjectures?"

"There were several consultations," resumed M. Plantat, as the continuation of M. Courtois's peroration died away, "which had no favourable results.

Sauvresy suffered strange unaccountable agony. He complained of such unwonted symptoms, such absurd ones, if you'll excuse the word, that he baffled the science and discouraged the endeavours of the most experienced physicians."

"Was it not R——, of Paris, who attended on him?" asked M. Gendron.

"Exactly. He came every day, and often remained over night. Many a time have I seen him walking along the high street with a troubled look, as he carried his prescription to the chemist's."

"Be wise enough," M. Courtois was shouting, "to moderate your just anger; remain calm and dignified."

"Your chemist is no doubt an intelligent fellow," continued Dr. Gendron, "but he has his master at Orcival, a skilful chap who knows how to make money as well. Perhaps you know him—his name is Robelot—"

"Robelot, the bone-setter?"

"That's the man. I suspect him of advising and prescribing *sub rosa*. He's very clever. In fact I educated him. Five or six years ago, he was my laboratory boy, and even now I employ him at times when I have a delicate operation on hand—" The doctor paused abruptly, being struck by a strange expression which had come over Papa Plantat's usually impassive features. "What's the matter?" he asked; "do you feel ill?"

M. Domini laid aside his notes, to look at his colleague. "M. Plantat is certainly very pale," said he.

Papa Plantat had, however, already recovered himself. "It's nothing," he answered, "really nothing, but my abominable stomach, which always troubles me whenever I change my hour of eating."

The mayor was just then raising his voice for the last time. "Return," said he, "to your peaceable homes, and quiet avocations. Remain assured that the law is on the watch. Justice has already set to work; two of the criminals are in custody, and we are on the track of their accomplices."

"Of all the servants of the château," remarked M. Plantat, resuming his previous conversation, "not one who knew Sauvresy remains. Those who did have all been replaced."

"No doubt," answered the doctor, "the sight of the old servants may not have been agreeable to M. de Trémoré."

He was interrupted by the mayor, who now returned with glowing eyes and animated features. "I have let the people realise the indecency of their curiosity," said he, wiping his forehead. "They have all gone away. They were anxious to get at Philippe Bertaud, so the corporal says. Ah! public opinion has a sharp scent." At this moment hearing the door open, he turned round and found himself confronted by a man whose features were scarcely distinguishable, so deeply did he bow with his hat pressed against his chest. "What do you want?" sternly asked M. Courtois. "What right have you to come in here? Who are you?"

The new comer drew himself up. "I am M. Lecoq," he replied, with a gracious smile. "M. Lecoq of the detective force, sent by the prefect of police in reply to a telegram respecting this affair."

The announcement clearly surprised everyone, the examining magistrate as much as the others, for M. Lecoq, whom none of them had ever met before, in no wise resembled the conventional French detective. The latter is commonly depicted as a tall fellow, with heavy moustaches and "imperial," wearing a military stock collar, a greasy silk hat, and a thread-bare frock-coat buttoned up to the throat so as to conceal either the complete absence of linen or at all events the extreme dirtiness of a calico shirt.

Such an individual will have immense feet incased in heavy Wellington's and will carry in his right hand a powerful sword-stick or bludgeon. Now M. Lecoq, as he appeared in the dining-room at Valfeuilu, had nothing whatever in common with this familiar type. It is true, however, that he can assume whatever air he pleases. Although his friends declare that he has features of his own which he retains at home when sitting by his own fire-side, with his slippers on, this is by no means certain. At all events, his mobile face lends itself to strange transformations, and he modifies his features according to his will, just as the sculptor moulds his modelling clay. He changes everything, even the expression of his eyes. On this occasion M. Lecoq had assumed a handsome wig of lank hair, neither fair nor dark, but rather pretentiously parted on one side. Whiskers of the same vague colour puffed out with bad pomade, encircled his pallid face. His eyelids were very red; his eyes seemed weak and watery, and an open smile rested on his thick lips, which, in parting, disclosed a range of long yellow teeth. Timidity, self-sufficiency, and contentment were equally blended in the expression of his features. No one would ever have credited the possessor of such a head with even average intelligence. He looked the picture of some dull-minded, money-grubbing haberdasher, who, after cheating his customers for thirty years, had retired on a large income. His coat was like all other coats, his trousers like all other trousers. A hair-chain, of the same colour as his whiskers, spanned his stomach, and a large silver watch could be seen bulging out of his left waistcoat pocket. While he spoke he fumbled with a horn box full of tiny square lozenges, and adorned on the cover with the portrait of a homely, well-dressed woman, "the dear defunct," no doubt. As the conversation proceeded, according as he was satisfied or disturbed, M. Lecoq munched one of these lozenges or gave the portrait a glance which was quite a poem in itself.

After examining him for a few minutes, M. Domini shrugged his shoulders. "Well," said he at last, "so the prefect has sent you. Now that you are here, we will explain to you what has occurred."

"Oh, that's quite useless," retorted Lecoq, with a satisfied air, "perfectly useless, sir."

"Nevertheless, it is necessary; you should know—"

"What you yourself know, sir;" "interrupted the detective, "but I know that already. We start with the fact that there have been two murders and with the presumption that their motive was robbery. The countess's body has been found but the count's hasn't. What else? Bertaud, an acknowledged rogue, has been arrested; he no doubt deserves some little punishment. Guespin came back drunk; ah, there are sad charges against him. His antecedents are deplorable; it is not known where he passed the night, he refuses to answer, and produces no alibi—this is serious indeed."

M. Plantat gazed at the detective with evident pleasure.

"Who told you all this?" asked M. Domini.

"Well—everybody has told me a little."

"But where?"

"Here: I've been here for the last two hours, and even heard the mayor's speech." And, satisfied with the effect this answer produced, M. Lecoq complacently munched a lozenge.

"Then you were not aware," resumed the magistrate, "that I was waiting for you?"

"Excuse me, sir," said the detective; "I hope you will be kind enough

to hear me. You see, it is indispensable to study the ground, to look about and establish one's batteries. I am always anxious to hear the general rumour, and ascertain the current of public opinion, so as to distrust it."

"But that does not justify your delay," answered M. Domini, severely.

M. Lecoq glanced tenderly at the portrait, on his lozenge box. "Monsieur has only to inquire at the prefecture," said he "and he will learn that I know my profession. For an inquiry to be effective it is necessary one should remain unknown. The police is not popular. Now, if people knew who I was, and why I was here, nobody would tell me anything; I might question folks, and if they didn't serve me a hundred lies, at all event they would distrust me, and hold their tongues."

"Quite true—quite true," murmured Plantat, coming to the detective's support.

"So when I was instructed to come here," continued M. Lecoq, "I put on my country face and clothes. On seeing me the people seemed to think me a curious bumpkin, but not a bad fellow on the whole. So I slipped about, listened, talked, and made the others talk. My questions were answered frankly enough. I gleaned information, gathered hints, and no one troubled himself about me. These Orcival folks are positively charming; why, I've already made several friends, and am invited to dine this very evening."

M. Domini scarcely concealed his dislike of the police, whose co-operation he rather submitted to than accepted, and solely because he could not do without them. While listening to M. Lecoq, he looked at him with a by no means friendly eye, and yet after all he could but approve what the detective said. "Since you know so much about the matter," he dryly observed at last, "we will proceed to examine the scene of the crime."

"I am quite at Monsieur's orders," laconically rejoined the detective, and while the magistrate rose to his feet, he profited of the opportunity to offer M. Plantat his lozenge-box. Plantat, unwilling to decline, appropriated a lozenge, and the detective's face became again serene. Like all great comedians he felt the need of public sympathy.

VI.

M. LECOQ was the first to reach the staircase, and the spots of blood at once arrested his attention. "Oh," cried he, at each spot he espied, "oh, oh, the wretches!" M. Courtois was greatly moved to find so much sensibility in a detective. "Ay, the wretches," continued Lecoq, as he reached the landing. "They don't often leave traces like this all over the place—or at least they wipe them out." He paused on the landing, eagerly scanning the position of the rooms. Then entering the boudoir, he exclaimed: "Come; I don't see my way clear yet."

"But it seems to me," remarked M. Domini, "that we have already important materials to aid your task. It is clear that Guespin, if he is not an accomplice, at least knew something about the crime."

M. Lecoq had recourse to the portrait on the lozenge-box. His look was more than a glance, it was a confidence. He was evidently saying something to the dear defunct, which he dared not utter aloud. "I see that Guespin is seriously compromised," resumed he at last. "Why wouldn't he tell you where he passed the night? But, then, public opinion is against him, and I have learnt to distrust public opinion."

Then politely requesting the others to remain for one moment on the threshold, he advanced into the centre of the bedroom, glancing keenly about him, and seeking for some explanation of the frightful disorder. "The ruffians!" cried he, in an irritated tone, "I can understand their murdering people to rob them, but that's no reason why they should break everything in the house. Sharp folks don't smash furniture; they provide themselves with pretty picklocks, which work well and make no noise. These men must have been idiots—" He stopped short with his mouth wide open. "Eh! And yet not so stupid, after all, perhaps."

The witnesses of this scene were standing in the doorway watching the detective's movements with mingled interest and surprise. Going down on his knees, he passed the palm of his hand over the carpet, among the broken crockery. "It's damp; very damp," said he. "It seems as if the tea hadn't been drunk when the cups were broken."

"Some of it might have remained in the tea-pot," suggested Plantat.

"I know that," answered M. Lecoq, "it is just what I was going to say: and in that case this dampness can't tell us the exact moment when the crime was committed."

"But the clock does, and very exactly," interrupted M. Courtois.

"Yes!" exclaimed M. Domini, "the mayor explains in his notes, that the clock stopped when it fell."

"Ay, but look here," said M. Plantat, "I was struck by the odd hour the clock indicates. The hands point to twenty minutes past three; and yet we know that the countess was fully dressed when she was murdered. It's hardly probable she was up taking tea at three in the morning."

"I also was struck with that circumstance," rejoined M. Lecoq, "and that's why I said 'not so stupid!' Well, let's see." He cautiously lifted the clock, and replaced it on the mantel-shelf, taking especial care to set it exactly upright. The hands still indicated the same time. "Twenty past three!" muttered the detective. "To be sure, people don't take tea at *that* hour, and it's still more unusual for people to be murdered at daylight." He opened the clock case with some difficulty, and pushed the minute hand to the half hour. The clock struck eleven! "Ah! ha!" cried M. Lecoq, triumphantly. "That's the right time!" and drawing his box from his pocket, he excitedly crushed a lozenge between his teeth.

The simplicity of this discovery surprised the lookers-on, to none of whom the idea of trying the clock in this way had yet occurred. M. Courtois, especially, was bewildered. "This fellow knows what he's about," whispered he to the doctor.

"*Ergo*," resumed M. Lecoq (who knew Latin), "our murderers were not mere brutes, as I thought at first, but rascals who looked beyond the mere accomplishment of their crime. They intended to put us off the scent, by deceiving us as to the time it occurred."

"I don't see their object very clearly," timidly remarked M. Courtois.

"Yet it is easy to see it," answered M. Domini. "Wasn't it in their interest to make it appear as if the crime was committed after the last train for Paris had started? After Guespin had left his companions at the Lyons station at nine o'clock, he could have returned here at ten, murdered the count and countess, seized the money which he knew was in the count's possession, and got back to Paris by the last train."

"These conjectures are very shrewd," interposed M. Plantat; "but then why didn't Guespin rejoin his friends at Batignolles? In that way he might, in a certain measure, have provided himself with a kind of alibi."

Doctor Gendron, who had been sitting on the only unbroken chair he could find, reflecting over Plantat's sudden embarrassment, when he had spoken of Robelot, the bone-setter, was drawn from his reverie by these remarks. "There's another point," said he, rising to his feet. "It might perhaps have served Guespin to put the time on, but it was bound to be very damaging for his accomplice, Bertaud."

"May be that Bertaud was not consulted," answered M. Domini. "As for Guespin, he had no doubt good reasons not to return to the wedding feast. After such a deed, he feared that his restlessness might betray him."

M. Lecoq had not intervened in this discussion. Like a doctor wishing to verify his diagnosis, he remained in front of the mantel-shelf, still pushing the hands of the clock round the dial. The time-piece successively struck half-past eleven, then twelve, then half-past twelve, then one.

As the detective moved the hands, he muttered to himself;

"So you were apprentices—chance brigands, eh? Malicious, no doubt, but you didn't think of everything. You pushed the hands round, but you forgot about the striking. So when an old rat of a detective comes along, the dodge is discovered." Then suddenly walking towards M. Domini and Plantat, he exclaimed: "You are perhaps now convinced, gentlemen, that the crime was committed at half-past ten."

"Unless the clock was out of order," interrupted M. Plantat.

"That often happens," M. Courtois chimed in. "The clock in my drawing-room is in such a state that I never know the right time of day."

Lecoq reflected. "It's possible that M. Plantat's right," said he. "Probabilities are in favour of my theory; but probability does not suffice in such cases; we must have certainty. Happily there's another means of testing this matter—by the bed; I'll wager it is rumpled up." And turning to the mayor, "I shall need a servant to lend me a hand," he added.

"I'll help you," said Plantat, "that will be quicker."

They raised the fallen canopy and curtains from off the bed and laid them on the floor. "Hum!" cried M. Lecoq, "was I right?"

"It's true," said M. Domini, with surprise, "the bed is rumpled."

"Yes; and yet no one has lain in it."

"But—" objected the mayor.

"I am sure of what I say," interrupted the detective. "The sheets have been thrown back, it's true, and perhaps some one has rolled about in the bed; the pillows have been tumbled and the quilt ruffled, but this bed has not at all the appearance of having been slept in."

"The countess was dressed," remarked Plantat; "but the count might have gone to bed first."

"No," answered M. Lecoq, "I'll prove the contrary. I'm not at all deceived by this intentional disorder of the bedclothes." While his listeners drew up beside him, he turned the coverings down, and continued, "Both of the pillows are very much rumpled, as you perceive. But look at the bolster underneath—it is quite smooth, with none of those impressions that are produced by the weight of a sleeper's head and the motion of his arms. That's not all; look at the lower half of the bed. I've only turned the coverings half-way down. Where I've left them, you'll see that the upper and under sheets lie close together. Slip your hand between them—there—you would never find them so tight together if a pair of legs had been stretched in this bed; and M. de Trémoré was quite tall enough to extend the full length." The correctness of this demonstration was apparent to every one. "However, that's nothing," resumed the detective. "Let

us examine the under mattress. When a person purposely disarranges a bed, he doesn't think of the under mattress." On raising the top one, they all perceived that the second mattress was perfectly even. "H'm, that under mattress," muttered M. Lecoq, as if some recollection crossed his mind.

"It seems proved," observed the examining magistrate, "that M. de Trémoré had not gone to bed."

"Yes, if he had been murdered in his bed," added the doctor, "his clothes would be lying here somewhere."

"Without considering that some blood must have been found on the sheets," suggested M. Lecoq. "Decidedly, these rascals were not over shrewd."

"The surprising thing to me," M. Plantat observed, "is that anybody could have succeeded in killing so vigorous a young fellow as Count Hector, except in his sleep."

"And in a house full of weapons," added Doctor Gendron; "for the count's study is full of firearms, swords, and hunting knives; it's a perfect arsenal."

"Alas!" sighed M. Courtois, "we know of worse catastrophes. Not a week goes by without the papers—"

He paused with disappointment, for nobody was listening to him.

Papa Plantat had engaged general attention as he continued—"You all seem surprised at the confusion in the house; I'm surprised that it's not even worse. I am, so to speak, an old man; I haven't the energy of a young fellow of thirty-five; and yet it seems to me that it would go hard with murderers if they got into my house while I was there, and up. Very likely I should be killed; but I certainly would give an alarm, defend myself, cry out, and open the windows, and even set the house afire, if need be."

"Moreover," insisted the doctor, "it is not easy to surprise a man who is awake. There is always some unexpected sound which puts you on your guard—perhaps a creaking door, or a cracking stair. However cautious the murderer may be, he does not take his victim completely unawares."

"They may perhaps have used firearms," once more chimed in the mayor, always anxious to have his little say; "that has been done before. You are sitting quietly in your room at summer time, with the windows open; you are chatting with your wife, and sipping a cup of tea; outside, the murderers have provided themselves with a short ladder; one of them climbs up to a level with the window, sights you at his ease, presses the trigger, the bullet speeds—"

"And the whole neighbourhood," finished Dr. Gendron, "is aroused by the report, and hastens to the spot."

"Permit me, permit me," replied M. Courtois, testily, "that might be the case in a populous town; but not here, in the midst of a spacious park. Think, doctor, how isolated this house is. The nearest neighbour is a long way off, and the trees that intervene intercept all sound. Let us test it by an experiment. I will fire a pistol in this room, and I'll wager you won't even hear the report from the road."

"In the daytime, perhaps, but not at night."

"Well," said M. Domini, who had been reflecting while M. Courtois chattered on, "well, if against my hopes, Guespin does not decide to speak to-night, or to-morrow, the count's body must eventually give us a key to the mystery."

During this discussion, M. Lecoq had continued his investigations, lifting

the fallen furniture, studying its fractures, examining the smallest bits of wood or stuff, as if they might betray the truth. Now and then he took out an instrument case, from which he produced a shank, with which he unlocked various drawers. Finding a towel hanging over a rack, he carefully put it on one side, as if he deemed it of importance. He went to and fro between the bedroom and the count's study, without losing a word of what was being said—making indeed a mental note both of the remarks themselves and of the tone in which they were exchanged. At inquiries like that now progressing anent the crime of Orcival, when several officials find themselves together, they speak to each other with a certain amount of reserve. Each of them admits that his associates have at least nearly as much experience as himself, that they are almost as shrewd and as elcar-headed, and that they are certainly equally interested in discovering the truth. They are none of them disposed to trust to appearances. Each very likely interprets the clues or discoveries in a different manner, and each may have a different theory as to the motive of the crime and its mode of perpetration; though a superficial observer would perhaps scarcely note these divergeneies. Such being the situation, each of the investigators seeks to hide his real thoughts, and strives to ascertain his neighbour's, and if the latter are opposed to his own, to convert him to his opinion. Men who hold the liberty and lives of others in their hands, who, with a scratch of the pen, may send a fellow-creature to the scaffold, are apt to feel heavily the burden of their responsibility. It becomes positive comfort to realise that this burden is shared by others. Caution being necessary, as a single word or gesture may at times have terrible consequences, one is always inclined to shrink from taking the initiative, or from expressing one's self openly. Other opinions are waited for to be adopted or offered. Suggestions are far more frequent than affirmations. Even such insinuations as are made are seldom formal; but then an apparently chance remark, some commonplace expression, some appropriate aside, usually suffices to influence the current of ideas and to provoke explanation. In this instance the examining magistrate and his colleague, M. Plantat, were far from sharing the same opinions; they had both of them long ago realised that it was so without even exchanging a word. M. Domini, whose opinion rested on a certain number of material facts, which appeared to him indisputable, was, however, not disposed to provoke contradiction; while Plantat, whose system seemed to rest on certain mysterious *impressions*, would not clearly express himself, without a positive and pressing invitation. His last remarks, made in an impressive tone, had not been replied to; but he would not venture further, judging that he had already advanced far enough to sound the detective, in whom he appeared most interested. "Well, M. Lecoq," asked he, "have you found any more traces?"

M. Lecoq was at that moment curiously examining a large portrait of Count Hector, which hung opposite the bed. Hearing M. Plantat's question, he turned and answered—"I have found nothing decisive, though at the same time nothing calculated to refute my conjectures. But—" He did not finish; he as well, perhaps, recoiled from his share of the responsibility.

"What do you say?" sternly asked M. Domini.

"I was going to say," resumed M. Lecoq, "that I am not yet satisfied. I have my lantern and a candle in it: I only need a match—"

"Please preserve decorum," interrupted M. Domini, severely.

"Very well then," continued M. Lecoq, in a tone of almost mock humi-

lity, "I still hesitate ; but if the doctor would now kindly examine the countess's body, he would greatly assist my task."

"I was just going to ask the same favour, doctor," said M. Domini.

"Willingly," answered M. Gendron, turning towards the door.

M. Lecoq caught him by the arm. "If you please," said he, in a very different tone to that which he had hitherto been using, "I should like to call your attention to the wounds on the head, inflicted by some blunt implement, which I fancy to be a hammer. I have studied these wounds, and though I am not a doctor, they seem to me suspicious."

"And to me also," quickly added M. Plantat.

"The nature of these wounds," continued M. Lecoq, "will fix my opinion." And, as he keenly felt M. Domini's recent rebuff, he added, "You hold the match I spoke of, doctor !"

M. Gendron was about to leave the room, when Baptiste, the mayor's servant, appeared on the threshold, and with a bow, informed his master that he had come for him.

"For me ? What for ?" asked M. Courtois. "What's the matter ? Can't I have a minute's rest ? Say that I am busy."

"It's on account of madame," rejoined the placid Baptiste ; "she isn't at all well."

The mayor turned pale. "My wife !" he cried in alarm. "What do you mean ? Explain yourself."

"The postman arrived just now," replied Baptiste with some complacency, "and I carried the letters to madame, who was in the drawing-room. But hardly had I turned on my heels when I heard a shriek, and the noise of some one falling on to the floor." Baptiste spoke as slowly as he could, taking artful pains to prolong his master's anguish.

"Speak ! go on !" cried the exasperated mayor. "Speak, won't you ?"

"I naturally opened the drawing-room door again. And what did I see ? Why, madame, at full length on the floor. I called for help ; the chambermaid, cook, and others came up, and we laid madame on the sofa. Justine said that it was a letter from Mademoiselle Laurence that had upset her." This information was imparted by Baptiste with many pauses and a mock air of hesitating sympathy ; but the rascal's eyes plainly betrayed that he related his master's misfortunes with intense satisfaction.

M. Courtois was in a state of consternation. As is commonly the case when we don't know exactly what misfortune threatens us, he had not courage enough to ask any questions. He stood still, lamenting, instead of hastening home, while M. Plantat profited by the pause to question the servant, with a look the latter dared not disobey. "What ! a letter from Mademoiselle Laurence ?" asked he. "Isn't she here, then ?"

"No, sir ; she went away a week ago, to pass a month with one of her aunts."

"And how is madame ?"

"Better, sir ; only she is crying bitterly."

The unfortunate mayor had now somewhat recovered his presence of mind. "Come along," cried he, seizing Baptiste by the arm, "come along !" and they hastened off together.

"Poor man !" said the examining magistrate. "Perhaps his daughter is dead."

M. Plantat shook his head. "If it were only that !" muttered he, and turning to M. Domini, he added : "Do you recollect old Bertaud's allusions, monsieur ?"

VII.

THE examining magistrate, the doctor, and Papa Plantat exchanged significant glances. What disaster could have befallen poor M. Courtois, who, despite his faults, was yet a very worthy man? This was certainly a day of misfortune! "Speaking of Bertaud's allusions," said M. Lecoq, "I have already heard two very curious stories, though I have only been here a few hours. It seems that this Mademoiselle Laurence—"

But M. Plantat abruptly interrupted the detective. "Slander, base slander," said he. "The lower classes are so jealous of well-to-do folks that they don't hesitate to disparage them. Round about here the aristocracy and the middle classes live in glass houses. Envy, hatred, and malice are always on the watch, trying to surprise secrets when there are any, and concocting others when there are none. A merchant's business may be prosperous, he may enjoy contentment and happiness, having the esteem and friendship of his fellows; but in the meanwhile he is being vilified by the lower classes who drag his name through the dust and indulge in the most gratuitous suppositions. Believe me, monsieur, envy spares no one."

"Well, if Mlle. Laurence has been slandered," observed Dr. Gendron, smiling; "at all events, she has a good advocate to defend her."

"There are causes," replied M. Plantat, colouring slightly, and speaking in a quieter tone not quite free from embarrassment, "which defend themselves. Mlle. Courtois has a right to all respect. But our own reputations, and our wives' and our daughters' honour, are at the mercy of the first scoundrel who has imagination enough to invent a slander. Perhaps his assertions are not believed at first, but they are repeated, and spread about. The law is powerless to arrest popular rumour, and we ourselves rarely even know what is being said about us."

"Pooh! After all," rejoined the doctor, "what does it matter? To my mind there is only one voice worth listening to—that of conscience. As for 'public opinion,' which resumes the aggregate ideas of a few thousand fools and rogues, I only despise it."

This discussion might have continued for some time if the investigating magistrate had not pulled out his watch, and hastily exclaimed, "While we are talking time flies, and there is still work to be done." It was then agreed that M. Domini should draw up his report of the case, while Dr. Gendron occupied himself with the *post-mortem* examination of Madame de Trémoré's remains, M. Plantat on his side agreeing to control Lecoq's investigations.

As soon as the two latter found themselves alone together, the detective drew a long breath, as if relieved of a heavy burden. "Ah!" said he, "we shall now be able to get along." Then noticing that Plantat smiled, he complacently munched a lozenge, and added, "I was very annoyed to find that the investigation had already begun when I arrived. The others have had time to start a theory, and think me a fool because I don't adopt it. The examining magistrate, for instance, thinks this a very simple affair; but I, Lecoq—Gévrol's equal at least, and Father Tabaret's favourite pupil as well—I don't see at all clearly through the matter yet."

He paused, and after apparently revolving his various discoveries in his mind, continued, "No, I'm off the track, and have indeed almost lost my

way. I can realise that there *is* something underneath all this—but what is it?”

M. Plantat's face was as placid as ever, but his eyes sparkled as he listened. “Perhaps you are right,” said he, carelessly; “perhaps there *is* something underneath.”

The detective looked at him inquisitively, but Papa Plantat seemed impenetrable. There was a long pause, which M. Lecoq profited by to confide his innermost thoughts to the portrait of “the dear departed” figuring on his lozenge-box. “See here, my darling,” he mentally remarked, “this worthy chap seems to be a shrewd old customer, and I must watch his actions and gestures carefully. He doesn't argue with the investigating magistrate; he's got some idea that he doesn't dare to tell, and we must find it out. At the very first he guessed me out, despite these pretty whiskers. As long as he thought he could mislead me, by making me follow M. Domini's tack, he positively showed me the way; but now that he sees me on the scent, he crosses his arms and retires. He wants to leave me the honour of the discovery. Why? He lives here, and perhaps he is afraid of making enemies in the neighbourhood. No, it can't be that. He isn't the man to be afraid of anything in particular. Well, what then? Ah! perhaps he shrinks from his own thoughts. He has discovered something so amazing, that he doesn't dare speak out.”

A sudden thought abruptly changed the course of M. Lecoq's soliloquy. “Suppose I'm wrong!” he pondered. Suppose this old fellow is not shrewd at all! Suppose he hasn't discovered anything, and only obeys chance inspiration. I've seen stranger things. I've known so many of these fogies whose eyes seem so mysterious, speaking perfect wonders; and, after all, I've found nothing in them. However, I must sound this old fellow properly.” In compliance with this last inspiration, he assumed his least intelligent expression, and added aloud, “On reflection, monsieur, there is little remaining to be done. Two of the principals are in custody, and when they make up their minds to talk—which they'll do sooner or later, if the magistrate is determined they shall—we shall know everything.”

A bucket of ice-water falling on M. Plantat's head could not have surprised him more disagreeably than these remarks—“What!” stammered he, with an air of frank amazement, “do you, a man of experience, who—”

Delighted with the success of his ruse, Lecoq could not keep his countenance, and Plantat, perceiving that he had been caught in a trap, indulged in a hearty laugh. Not a word, however, was exchanged between these two men, who were both so well versed in the mysteries of life. They quite understood each other. “My worthy old buck,” said the detective to himself, “you've got something in your bag; only it's so monstrous, that you won't exhibit it. You wish your hand forced, do you? Ve—ry well!” “He's sly,” thought M. Plantat. “He knows that I've got an idea; he's trying to get at it—and I believe he will.”

M. Lecoq had restored his lozenge-box to his pocket, as he always did when he went seriously to work. “Now,” cried he, “let's to horse. According to the mayor's account, the implement with which all these things were broken has been found.”

“Yes, we found a hatchet in a room overlooking the garden on the second floor,” answered M. Plantat; “It was lying on the floor, near a cupboard which had been assaulted, but not broken into; I wouldn't let any one touch it.”

"And you did quite right. Is it a heavy hatchet?"

"It weighs a couple of pounds or so."

"Good. Let's see it."

They went upstairs to the room in question, and M. Lecoq, forgetting his haberdasher aspect and regardless of his clothes, went down flat on his stomach, alternately scrutinizing the hatchet and the slippery, well-waxed oak floor.

"I suppose," observed M. Plantat, "that the murderers brought this hatchet up here and assailed this cupboard, merely to put us off the scent, and complicate the mystery. This weapon, you see, was by no means needed in breaking the cupboard open; I could smash the panel with my fist. They gave one blow—only one—and quietly put the hatchet down."

The detective rose to his feet and brushed himself. "I think you are mistaken," said he. "This hatchet wasn't laid gently on the floor; it was thrown with considerable violence, prompted either by rage or fright. Look here; do you see these three marks, close together on the floor? When the murderer threw the hatchet, it first fell on its edge—producing this sharp cut; then it fell over on one side; and the flat, or hammer end, left this mark here, under my finger. I conclude, therefore, it was thrown with such violence that it turned right over, and that its edge cut into the floor a second time, just as you see it now."

"It seems as you say," answered M. Plantat; but as the detective's conjectures apparently refuted his own theory he added, with a look of perplexity, "Then I don't understand anything about it."

"Were the windows open this morning as they are now?" asked M. Lecoq, and, on receiving an affirmative reply, he continued, "Ah, then the rascals must have heard some noise or other in the garden, and went and looked out. I can't tell what they saw, but I'm certain it must have terrified them, for they threw down the hatchet and made off. Look at the position of these cuts—they are slanting of course—and you will see that the hatchet was thrown by a man standing, not by the cupboard, but close to the open window."

Plantat in his turn knelt down, and, scrutinizing the cuts attentively, perceived that the detective was right. He rose in some confusion, and after a moment's thought remarked, "This perplexes me a little; however—" He paused in a reverie, with one of his hands on his forehead. "All might yet be explained," he muttered, mentally searching for a solution of the mystery, "and in that case the time indicated by the clock would be correct."

M. Lecoq did not think of questioning his companion, for he knew that the latter was not disposed to answer him. "This matter of the hatchet puzzles me, too," said he. "I thought the murderers worked at their leisure; but now that can't have been so. They must have been surprised and interrupted." Plantat was all ears. "The traces we have found," continued the detective "are of two kinds—those left on purpose to mislead us, such as the tumbled bed; and the real ones left by inadvertence, such as these hatchet cuts. But here I hesitate. I thought myself sure of the character of these murderers; but now—" He paused; and his contracted features clearly showed that he was engaged in a mental effort.

"But now?" asked M. Plantat.

M. Lecoq seemed to wake up. "I beg your pardon," said he. "I forgot myself. I've a bad habit of reflecting aloud. That's why I almost always insist on working alone. My uncertainty and hesitation, the way-

wardness of my suspicions, compromise my reputation as an astute detective, for whom there's no such thing as a mystery." Worthy M. Plantat smiled indulgently. "I don't usually open my mouth," continued M. Lecoq, "until my mind is satisfied; then I speak in a peremptory tone, and say this is so or so. To-day, however, I am working openly with a man who realises that such a problem as this cannot be solved at the first attempt. This is why I allow you to see how I grope along. One can't always reach the truth at a bound; to realise it at times various calculations and deductions are necessary. Well, just now my logic is at fault."

"How so?"

"Oh, it's very simple. I thought I understood the rascals, and knew them by heart; and yet I fear I have only recognized imaginary adversaries. Are they fools, or are they mighty sly? That's what I ask myself. I fancied that the tricks played with the bed and the clock had summed up all their intelligence and power of invention. By a series of very simple deductions, I fancied I could foretell all they would have imagined, to throw us off the scent. In order to reach the truth, I had only to construe appearances in a contrary sense. I said to myself: A hatchet has been found on the second floor; hence the assassins carried it there, and designedly forgot it. They left five glasses on the dining-room table; hence they were more or less than five, but they were not five. There were the remains of some supper on the table; therefore they neither ate nor drank. The countess's body was found on the river bank; therefore it was placed there deliberately. A piece of cloth was found in the victim's hand; hence it was put there by the murderers themselves. Madame de Trémoré's body is horribly mutilated and disfigured by numerous dagger strokes; hence she was killed by a single blow—"

"Bravo! bravo" cried M. Plantat, with evident delight.

"Eh! no, not 'bravo' yet," rejoined M. Lecoq. "For here my thread is broken. If my deductions were sound, this hatchet would have been laid very gently on the floor."

"But this does not at all affect your general theory," retorted Papa Plantat excitedly. "It is clear, nay, certain, that the murderers intended to act as you say; but some unlooked-for incident interrupted them."

"Perhaps; perhaps that's true. But I see something else—"

"What?"

"Nothing—at least, for the moment. Before anything else I must visit the dining-room and he garden."

They went downstairs at once, and Plantat pointed out the bottles and glasses which he had previously put on one side. The detective took the glasses, one after the other, held them level with his eye, towards the light, and scrutinized them carefully wherever they were moist. "No one has drunk out of these glasses," said he, firmly.

"What! not from one of them?"

The detective looked keenly at his companion, and in a measured tone replied, "Not from one of them."

M. Plantat's only rejoinder was to purse his lips, as if to say, "You are going too far."

M. Lecoq smiled, opened the door, and called François, the valet. "Hear what I've got to say, my lad," he said, with true detective-like familiarity, when the servant reached the room. "And be sure and answer me exactly, frankly, and briefly."

"I will, sir."

"Was it customary here to bring the wine up into the dining-room before it was wanted?"

"No, sir; before each meal, I went down to the cellar for it myself."

"Then no full bottles were ever kept in the dining-room?"

"Never."

"But some of the bottles might sometimes remain half full?"

"No; the count allowed me to take the bottles that had been opened to the servants' table."

"And where were the empty bottles put?"

"I put them in this corner cupboard, and when there was a certain number of them, I carried them down into the cellar."

"When did you last do so?"

"At least five or six days ago."

"Good. Now, what liqueurs did the count drink?"

"The count scarcely ever drank any; but if, by chance, he took a notion to have a small glass of brandy, he got it from the liqueur stand, on the shelf over the stove."

"There were no decanters of rum or cognac in any of the cupboards?"

"No."

"Thanks; you may retire." But just as François was going out, M. Lecoq added: "While we are about it, look into the empty bottle cupboard, and see if you find the right number of empty bottles there."

"There isn't one there," rejoined the valet, after doing as he was bid.

"Just so," remarked M. Lecoq. "This time show us your heels for good." As soon as François had shut the door, the detective turned to Plantat and asked: "Well, what do you think now?"

"That you were perfectly right."

Lecoq then smelt each glass and bottle in turn, "Ah! ah!" said he, "here's more proof in favour of my theory. No wine was poured into these glasses at all. But one of the empty bottles put away in the cupboard, and here it is,—had contained *vinegar*; and the rascals mistook the dregs of vinegar for wine and emptied them into the glasses." As he spoke Lecoq held a glass to M. Plantat's nose, adding, "See for yourself."

There was no disputing it. The vinegar was good and very strong; in their haste, the murderers had left behind them a positive proof of their desire to mislead the officers of justice. Their ideas were shrewd enough, but they bungled sadly when carrying them into effect. However, all their oversights might be accounted for by sudden haste caused by an unexpected incident. M. Lecoq, who knew how to appreciate a piece of work artistically performed, was seemingly exasperated to find such pretentious ideas carried out so unskilfully; and after giving audible expression to his indignation he ate three or four lozenges at a mouthful.

"Come now," said Plantat, in a tone of paternal severity, "don't let's get angry. The fellows have failed in address, no doubt; but just remember that they could never have imagined they would have to contend against a man of your skill." The detective had all a comedian's vanity, and failed to conceal the pleasure which the compliment gave him. "We must be indulgent; come now," continued Plantat. "Besides," and pausing a moment so as to give more weight to that he was going to say—"besides, you haven't seen everything yet."

No one could tell when M. Lecoq was acting or no. He did not always know himself. This great artist, devoted to his profession, had not merely taught himself how to wear every kind of disguise, but how to feign all

the emotions of the human soul as well. He was very indignant against the murderers, and gesticulated with great excitement; but his sly eyes never ceased watching Plantat, and the latter's last words now made him prick up his ears. "Let's see the rest, then," said he; and as he followed his companion into the garden, he renewed his confidences to the portrait of the dear defunct. "Confound this old bundle of mystery! we can't take this obstinate fellow by surprise, that's clear. He'll tell us the riddle when we have guessed it; not before. He is as strong as we are, my darling; he only needs a little practice. But, look you, if he has found out anything which has escaped us, he must have had previous information that we don't know of."

Nothing had been disturbed in the garden, and as Papa Plantat turned along one of the pathways leading to the river he pointed out to Lecoq the precise spots where the count's slipper had been picked up and his silk handkerchief found. On reaching the river bank, they carefully raised some planks which had been laid so as to preserve the footprints noticed that morning, and Plantat spoke as follows: "We suppose," said he, "that the countess fled and was caught here by the murderers, who gave her the final blow."

M. Lecoq could not tell whether this was Plantat's own opinion, or whether he was merely reporting the morning's theory. "According to my calculations," said the detective, "the countess could not have fled, but was carried here when she was already dead; or else logic is not logic. However, let us examine this spot carefully." He knelt down and studied the sandy soil of the path, the stagnant water, the reeds and water-lilies. Then retreating a short distance off, he threw a stone, and noted what effect it produced on the mud. After returning to the house along the pathway, he next proceeded to cross the lawn on all fours, quite regardless of soiling his garments. There were still signs of some heavy burden having been dragged over the grass, well-nigh every blade of which he scrutinized, noting the direction of those which were bent or broken, and even pulling away the thicker tufts to observe the condition of the soil underneath. At length, reaching the willows where Plantat stood inquisitively watching him, he rose and said, "My opinion is confirmed—the countess was dragged across the lawn."

"Are you sure of it?" asked Plantat. There was no mistaking the old man's hesitation this time; he was clearly undecided, and leaned on the other's judgment for guidance.

"There can be no mistake about it," rejoined the detective; and with a smile he added, "Only, as two heads are better than one, I will ask you to listen to me, and then to tell me what you think." In looking about, he had picked up a switch which he now made use of as he talked to point out various objects he wished to call attention to, just like some lecturer at a panorama. "Now," said he, "Madame de Trémoré did not fly from her murderers, for if she had been killed here, she would have fallen with great weight on to the ground, and the water in which she was partially immersed would have spurted to some distance as well as the mud; in that case we should certainly have found some splashes."

"But don't you think that, since morning, the sun—"

"The sun would have dried up the water, no doubt, but the mud stains would have remained, and I have found none anywhere. You might object that the water and mud would have spirted right and left; but just look at these reeds, flags, and lilies; there is a light dust on all of them, and not

the least trace of mud or water. So there was no splash then, and no violent fall; the countess was not killed here; her body was brought here, and carefully deposited where you found it."

M. Plantat did not seem as yet quite convinced. "But there are the traces of a struggle in the sand," said he.

"You must be joking, sir," retorted M. Lecoq; "those traces wouldn't deceive a school-boy."

"It appears to me, however—"

"There can be no mistake, M. Plantat. The sand has certainly been disturbed and stamped upon. But all those marks were made by the same foot, and with the tip of the foot, too. You can see that for yourself."

"Yes, I perceive it."

"Very well, then; when a struggle occurs on ground like this, there are always two distinct kinds of traces—those left by the assailant, and those left by the victim. The assailant, in throwing himself forward, necessarily rests on his toes, and the tips of his feet are strongly indented in the ground. But, on the other hand, the victim throws himself back, and in trying to resist the assault pegs his heels into the soil. If the adversaries are fairly matched, the toe and heel marks will be nearly equal in number, according to the fluctuations of the struggle. However, what do we find here? plenty of marks left by the tip of a foot, but not one strong indentation of the heels."

"I agree with you," interrupted M. Plantat. "Your remarks would convince the most incredulous listener."

M. Lecoq thought that his argument deserved a reward, and treated himself to two lozenges at a mouthful. "I haven't done yet," he resumed. "Having determined that the countess could not have been murdered here, I will add that she was not carried but dragged here. There are only two ways of dragging a body; either by the shoulders, in which case the feet, scraping along the ground, leave two parallel trails; or by the legs, when the head hangs downmost and leaves but one wide furrow." Plantat nodded assent, and M. Lecoq continued. "When I examined the lawn I found the parallel trails of two feet, and yet the grass was bent down over some considerable width. How was that? Because it was not a man's but a woman's body that was dragged across the lawn—a woman full dressed and wearing heavy skirts; in short, the countess, and not the count."

M. Lecoq paused in expectation of some question or remark. But Papa Plantat seemed lost in thought, and it was uncertain whether he had even listened to these last details. Night was falling, and a light fog hung over the Seine and the lower ground. "We had better go in," said Plantat, suddenly waking up, "and see how the doctor has got on with his *post-mortem* examination."

As they slowly approached the house they perceived M. Domini waiting for them on the steps. His look seemed to imply considerable inward satisfaction. "I am going to leave you in charge," he said to M. Plantat, "for if I am to see the Public Prosecutor, I must go at once. When you sent for him this morning he was absent." M. Plantat bowed. "I shall be much obliged if you will watch this affair to the end," continued M. Domini. "The doctor tells me he will have finished in a few minutes, and will send in his report to-morrow morning. I rely on you to place seals wherever they are necessary, and to appoint a proper guardian of the château. I shall send you an architect to draw up a plan of the house and

garden." Then, turning to the detective, he added, "Well, sir, have you made any fresh discoveries?"

"I have ascertained some important facts," replied Lecoq, "but I cannot speak decisively till I have seen everything by daylight. If you will allow me, I will postpone making my report till to-morrow afternoon. I think I may say, however, that although the affair is complicated—"

M. Domini did not allow him to finish. "I see nothing complicated in the affair at all; everything strikes me as very simple."

"But," objected M. Lecoq, "I thought—"

"I sincerely regret that you were so hastily sent for, when there was really no serious reason for it," continued the magistrate. "The evidence against the arrested men is very conclusive."

Plantat and Lecoq exchanged a glance of surprise. "What!" asked the former, "have you obtained any fresh information?"

"I have questioned old Bertaud," again replied M. Domini, "and he is not nearly so much at his ease as he was at first. I have succeeded in making him contradict himself several times, and he has at length confessed that he saw the murderers."

"The murderers!" exclaimed M. Plantat. "Did he say the murderers?"

"He saw at least one of them, though he persists in declaring that he did not recognize him. That's where we are. However, imprisonment usually has salutary effects, and to-morrow, after a sleepless night, he will no doubt be more explicit."

"And Guespin," anxiously asked M. Plantat, "have you questioned him?"

"Oh, as for him, everything is clear."

"Has he confessed?" asked M. Lecoq, stupefied.

The magistrate turned sharply towards the detective, evidently displeased that he should presume to question him. "Guespin has *not* confessed," he answered, "but our searchers have returned, and although they haven't yet recovered the count's body, which I think has been carried down by the current, they found his other slipper among the rose-bushes at the end of the park, while under the bridge, in the middle of the river, they hauled up a thick coat stained with blood."

"A coat belonging to Guespin?"

"Exactly. All the servants recognized it, and Guespin himself admitted that it belonged to him. But that is not everything—" M. Domini paused as if to take breath, but in reality to keep Plantat in suspense. As they differed in their theories, he considered Plantat's opposition to be absurd, and eagerly seized an opportunity for a little triumph. "That is not everything," he continued; "there is a large rent in that coat, and a piece of the cloth has been torn off. Do you know where that piece of cloth has been found?"

"Ah," muttered M. Plantat, "it is the piece we found in the countess's hand."

"You are right, sir. And now, what do you think of this proof of the prisoner's guilt?"

M. Plantat seemed overwhelmed, while M. Lecoq, who, in the magistrate's presence, had resumed his haberdasher manner, was so surprised that he nearly strangled himself with a lozenge. "Thunder!" exclaimed he, with a silly smile. "That's tough, that is!" But he added in a lower tone, meant only for Plantat's ear, "Mighty tough! though quite foreseen in our calculations. If the countess held a piece of cloth tightly in her hand, it was put there, *intentionally*, by the murderers."

M. Domini did not hear this remark. He shook hands with M. Plantat, and after making an appointment to meet him on the morrow, left the château with his clerk. A few minutes previously, Guespin and old Bertaud, both of them duly handcuffed, had started for the prison of Corbeil, in the custody of the Orcival gendarmes.

VIII.

IN the billiard room, Dr. Gendron had just finished his *post-mortem* examination, to accomplish which he had doffed his coat and rolled his shirt sleeves up above his elbows. His instruments were set out on a side table, and a sheet had been thrown over the countess's body. It was now night, and a large lamp, with a crystal globe, alone illuminated the gloomy scene. The doctor was washing his hands when Papa Plantat and the detective entered the apartment. "Ah, it's you," said Dr. Gendron in an undertone, "Where is M. Domini?"

"Gone."

The doctor did not conceal his vexation. "How unfortunate," said he, "for it is absolutely necessary I should speak with him, and the sooner the better; for perhaps I am wrong—I may be mistaken—"

M. Lecoq and Plantat had closed the door and drawn close to the practitioner. The latter was as pale as the corpse on the billiard table, and his usually placid features wore an expression of great distress. M. Gendron was familiar with such tasks as that in which he had just been engaged, so that the mere accomplishment of a chirurgical duty, no matter how painful, could scarcely have occasioned this change in his appearance. He must rather have made some singular discovery. "I am going to ask you what you asked me a few hours ago," said M. Plantat. "Are you ill?"

M. Gendron shook his head negatively, and answered with emphasis, "I must give you the same reply as you gave me. It's nothing; I'm better already."

Both M. Plantat and the doctor averted their eyes as if they feared to exchange their ideas; they realised that their looks might betray them.

"I believe I know the cause of the doctor's emotion," said M. Lecoq, stepping forward. "He has just discovered that Madame de Trémoré was killed by a single blow, and that the assassins deliberately disfigured her body, when it was nearly cold."

The doctor's eyes turned to the detective with a stupefied expression. "How could you divine that?" he asked.

"Oh, I didn't guess it alone. The theory which has enabled us to foresee this circumstance belongs as much to M. Plantat as to myself."

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor, "now, I recollect what you said about some of the wounds; in my worry I had quite forgotten it. However, your foresight is confirmed. Perhaps not so much time as you suppose elapsed between the first blow and the others; but I am convinced that the countess had been dead nearly three hours when the last blows were struck."

Walking to the billiard-table, M. Gendron slowly drew back the sheet, so that the countess's head and shoulders were disclosed to view. At his request, Plantat took the lamp and passed round to the other side of the table, at the head of which stood M. Lecoq, leaning over so as to see more clearly. The countess's face had been carefully washed, and all stains of

blood and mud effaced. Her wounds had thus become more apparent; and yet, despite these hideous blemishes, despite the frightful expression of the eyes and the distorted twinge of the parted mouth—opened, no doubt, to shriek for help—traces of former beauty might still be found upon that livid countenance. Plantat, the man with a stone heart, averted his gaze, and the hand with which he held the lamp trembled so violently that the globe jingled loudly against the inner glass. “The countess,” said Doctor Gendron, in the apathetic tone favourite to the profession, “received eighteen stabs from a dagger. Only one of these was mortal—this almost vertical stab which you see a little below the shoulder behind.” He pointed out the wound, supporting the body with his left arm. “The blade of the weapon with which this stab was given must have been an inch wide, and eight inches long. All the other stabs—either on the arms, breast, or the shoulders—are comparatively slight. I am inclined to think that they must have been inflicted at least two hours after the one which caused death.”

“Good,” said M. Lecoq.

“Observe that I am not positive,” hastily rejoined the doctor. “I merely state a probability. The phenomena on which I base my conviction are too fugitive and capricious in their nature to enable me to speak with absolute certainty.” This seemed to disappoint M. Lecoq, who would have interrupted had not the doctor swiftly continued: “Now, let us leave the stabs alone and deal with the other wounds. What I can affirm, what I would affirm under oath, is, that all those on the head, excepting one, were inflicted after death. There can be no doubt of that whatever. Here, above the eye, is the blow received while the countess was alive.”

“It seems to me, doctor,” observed M. Lecoq, “that we may conclude from your examination that the countess was both mutilated with a knife and struck with a flat implement after her death.”

“Such is no doubt my private opinion,” replied Dr. Gendron, after a moment’s reflection. “But the conclusions of my report must be based upon patent facts. Where there is even the slightest doubt, the medical expert, consulted by the law, should hold his tongue. I will say even more, the defendant should always have the benefit of that doubt.”

Such an opinion was scarcely likely to have a detective’s approval. However, Lecoq was cautious enough not to explain his own views. While the doctor again drew the sheet over the countess’s head, and Plantat replaced the lamp on the side-table, he indulged in a moment’s reflection, and then observed: “I think I can now determine under what circumstances the countess was murdered.” Both the doctor and Plantat eagerly asked the detective to explain himself. “Madame de Trémoré,” he replied, “was in her bedroom taking tea. The direction of the fatal stab proves to my mind that she was seated at the table, leaning slightly forward. The murderer came up behind her, he carefully chose his position, raised his arm, and stabbed her with such force, just under the shoulder, that she fell forward and in doing so struck her forehead against the edge of the table. Both fatal wounds are thus explained, the stab behind and the blow received on the temple just above the eye.”

Dr. Gendron looked alternately at his two companions, who exchanged significant glances. He perhaps realized the inference which would be drawn from their theory, though he only contented himself with remarking that the crime must have been committed as Lecoq said. Another embarrassing pause ensued, but at last Plantat, annoyed that the detective would

speak no further, asked him if he had seen all he wanted to see. M. Lecoq answered that he had mastered all details but one, which he should like to deal with at daylight, when he hoped to finally solve the mystery. It was accordingly agreed to return to the château early on the following morning, and then to call on M. Domini at Corbeil. While making this arrangement with Plantat, M. Lecoq, who perceived that his reticence was greatly puzzling the old man, determined to astonish him on the morrow, by giving him a report in which all his own ideas would be faithfully reflected. The doctor suggesting that they should now leave, the detective readily assented, remarking that he had been fasting ever since the morning, whereupon M. Plantat took a bold step indeed. "Do you intend to return to Paris to-night, M. Lecoq?" he asked abruptly.

"No; I came prepared to stop over night; I left my little bag at the inn near the bridge as I came along. I shall sup and sleep there."

"You will be poorly off at the 'Faithful Grenadier,'" said the old justice of the peace. "You would do much better to come and dine with me."

"You are really too kind, monsieur—"

"Not at all: we have a good deal to talk over, and it is best you should remain with me; we can call for your night clothes on the way."

M. Lecoq bowed, flattered by and grateful for the invitation.

"And I shall carry you of as well, doctor," continued M. Plantat, "whether you will or not. Now, don't say no. If you insist on going to Corbeil to-night we'll escort you there after supper."

Before starting, all the apartments of the château bearing any traces of the tragedy had to be sealed up in accordance with the law. Narrow strips of parchment, secured by large wax seals, were accordingly affixed to all the doors, as well as to the chest of drawers in which the various articles collected for the purposes of the investigation had been deposited by M. Domini.

IX.

DESPITE the haste they made, it was nearly ten o'clock when M. Plantat and his guests left Valfeuilu. Instead of taking the high road, they availed themselves of a short cut to the inn where M. Lecoq had left his little bag, and while walking M. Plantat suddenly bethought himself of M. Courtois's mysterious misfortune. "What can have happened?" said he to Doctor Gendron, who could only respond that some letter from Mademoiselle Laurence had evidently caused the trouble, although, owing to the servant's stupidity, it was impossible even to guess what that trouble was.

The party had now reached the hostelry known as the "Faithful Grenadier," and perceived the landlord smoking his pipe in front of the door. "Well, Monsieur Plantat," cried he, "what a horrible affair this is! Come in, come in; there are several folks in the public room who saw the murderers. What a villain old Bertaud is! and that fellow Guespin too. Ah, I would willingly trudge to Corbeil to see them put up the guillotine!"

"A little charity, Master Lenfant; you forget that these men were two of your best customers."

Master Lenfant was confused by this retort; but he soon recovered himself. "Fine customers, parbleu!" he answered, "why, that thief of a Guespin has got thirty francs of mine which I'll never see again."

"Who knows?" said Plantat, ironically. "Besides, you will make more than that to-night; its quite a fête, and I see you've got plenty of customers."

While these remarks were being exchanged, M. Lecoq had gone into the inn for his bag. His calling being no longer a secret, he was not welcomed in the same fashion as when he was taken for a respectable, retired haberdasher. Madame Lenfant, who had no need of her husband's aid to show penniless sots the door, scarcely deigned to answer him, and when he asked how much he owed her, she contemptuously answered "Nothing." As he returned to the door carrying his bag, M. Plantat exclaimed, "Let's make haste, for I want to get some news of our poor mayor."

While they hurried on again at a swift pace, he hopefully remarked, "After all, if anything serious had happened at the mayor's, I should certainly have been informed of it by this time. Perhaps Laurence has written that she is ill, or simply unwell. Madame Courtois gets excited about nothing; she probably wanted to send her husband for Laurence at once. You'll see that it's some false alarm."

He was mistaken; something serious had plainly happened, for in front of the mayor's gate stood a number of women in presence of whom Baptiste, the servant was ranting and gesticulating. The women fled like a troop of frightened gulls at M. Plantat's unexpected approach, and the placid Baptiste, interrupted in the midst of a superb oratorical flight, had some trouble in concealing his discomfiture. However, as he had a salutary fear of M. Plantat, he did his best to hide his chagrin under his habitual smile. "Ah, sir," cried he; "ah, what an affair! I was going for you—"

"Does your master want me?"

"More than you can think. He ran so fast from Valfeuilu here, that I could scarcely keep up with him. He's not usually fast, you know; but you ought to have seen him this time, fat as he is!" M. Plantat stamped impatiently. "Well, we got here at last," resumed Baptiste, "and monsieur rushed at once into the drawing-room, where he found madame weeping like a Magdalene. He was so out of breath he could scarcely speak. His eyes darted out of his head, and it was as much as he could do to stammer, 'What's—the—matter? What's—the—matter?' Madame, who couldn't speak either, held him mademoiselle's letter, which she had in her hand." The rogue perceived that his three listeners were boiling over with impatience; and deliberately spoke as slowly as he could, "Then monsieur took the letter," said he, "went to the window, and read it through at a glance. He cried out 'Oh!' in a hoarse voice, and beat the air with his hands. He looked just like a dog swimming! Then he rushed up and down, and all of a sudden—pouf!—he fell like a bag on to the floor. That was all."

"Is he dead?" cried the three listeners in the same breath.

"Oh, no; you shall see," replied Baptiste, with a placid smile.

Now, M. Lecoq was a patient man, but not so patient as you might think. He could put up with Baptiste's verbiage and complacency no longer. Throwing down his bag, he caught hold of the servant's arm with one hand and threateningly flourished a light, flexible cane with the other. "Now, look here, fellow," said he, "just you make haste and come to the point."

Baptiste was cowed at once; this little, fair man's straggling voice and powerful grip quite appalled him. Accordingly he now spoke as fast as he could, keeping his eyes on the detective's rattle, with which he no doubt

scarcely cared to make any closer acquaintance. "Monsieur had an attack of vertigo," said he. "All the house was in confusion; and the others had lost their heads, when I started off for a doctor. I meant to fetch Dr. Gendron, or our Orcival doctor, or else the chemist, when by good luck, at the street corner, I met Robelot, the bone-setter. I brought him back with me, and he bled master in both arms. Soon afterwards monsieur began to breathe again, opened his eyes, and spoke. He's now much better, though he's still lying on a sofa in the drawing-room, crying with all his might. He told me he wanted to see M. Plantat, and I—"

"And—Mademoiselle Laurence?" asked M. Plantat, in a quivering voice.

"Ah, gentlemen," replied Baptiste, assuming a tragic air, "don't ask me about her, it's heartrending!"

The doctor and M. Plantat hurried into the house without waiting to hear any more—and M. Lecoq followed them, after handing his bag to Baptiste and exclaiming, "Carry that to M. Plantat's at once."

As the two entered the hall they perceived a young girl who had formerly acted as Mademoiselle Laurence's maid sitting at the foot of the staircase and weeping bitterly. Other servants with frightened faces stood round about in a kind of idle stupor, while on the floor above, one could hear the tramp of the housekeeper as she hastened to and fro attending on the mayor's youngest daughter Lucile, who had had a nervous attack, on beholding her parent's grief. The drawing-room door was wide open, and in the dim light furnished by two candles, Madame Courtois could be seen extended in a large arm-chair near the fire-place, while her husband was lying on a sofa between the windows. In order to bleed him, his coat had been taken off and his shirt sleeves torn away. His bare arms were now wrapped round with linen bandages. Just inside the doorway, a man, dressed like an artisan, stood watching the scene with an air of some embarrassment. This was Robelot, who had remained in case his services might be required again. M. Plantat's arrival roused M. Courtois from his sorrowful meditations. He rose to his feet, and staggered into Plantat's arms, exclaiming in a broken voice—"Ah, my friend, I am most miserable—most wretched!"

The unfortunate mayor could indeed be scarcely recognised. He was no longer the happy man of the world, with smiling face and proud look, expressive of self-satisfaction and prosperity. A few hours had aged him as if they had been long years. He was utterly overwhelmed, and could only repeat, vacantly, again and again—"Wretched! most wretched!"

M. Plantat was the right sort of friend for such a time. He led M. Courtois back to the sofa, sat down beside him, and, taking his hand in his own, endeavoured to calm his grief. He reminded him that his wife, the companion of his life, remained to mourn the dear departed with him. Had he not, moreover, another daughter to cherish? However, the poor man was in no state to listen to all this.

"Ah, my friend," said he, shuddering, "you don't know everything! If she had died here, among us, and after everything had been done to save her, my grief and despair would still have been very great, though nothing in comparison with the feelings which now torture me. If you only knew—" M. Plantat rose, as if prematurely terrified by what he was about to hear. "But who can tell," continued the mayor, "where or how she died? My poor, dear Laurence, was there no one near to save you? What has become of you? Is it possible you are dead, you—so young—so

happy?" He rose in his turn, quivering with anguish, and cried, "Plantat, let us go and look for her at the Morgue." Then falling back again, he repeated in a lugubrious tone, "the Morgue."

The lookers-on stood by in silence, holding their breath, and awed, as it were, by this outburst of paternal grief. Madame Courtois's stifled sobs and the lamentations of the little maid sitting on the staircase were the only sounds to be heard. "You know that I am your friend—your best friend," said M. Plantat, softly; "confide in me—tell me everything."

"Well," commenced M. Courtois, "know—" but his tears choked his utterance, and he could not proceed. At last, holding out a crumpled paper, he stammered: "Here, read this—her last letter."

M. Plantat approached the table where the candlesticks stood, and, with some difficulty, read as follows:—"DEARLY BELOVED PARENTS,—I must beseech you to forgive your unhappy daughter for the distress she is about to cause you. Alas! I have been very guilty, but my punishment is terrible! On a day of error, I forgot everything—the example and advice of my dear, sainted mother, my most sacred duties, and your affection. I could not, no, I *could* not, resist the entreaties of one who wept while swearing me eternal love—and who has yet abandoned me. Now, all is over; I am lost, lost. I cannot long conceal my dreadful sin. Oh, dear parents, do not curse me. I am your daughter—I cannot bear to face contempt—I will not survive my dishonour. When this letter reaches you, I shall be no more; I shall have left my aunt's, and gone far away, where no one will find me, to put an end to my misery and despair. Good-bye—forgive me—good-bye. Had I only dared, I would have liked, for the last time, to beg your forgiveness on my knees. My dear mother, my good father, have pity on a poor sinner; pardon me, forgive me. Never let my sister Lucile know. Once more, good-bye—I have courage—honour demands that I should die. The last prayer and supreme thought of your poor Laurence will be for you." Big tears rolled down Papa Plantat's cheeks as he deciphered this sad letter, and bitter anger contracted the muscles of his face. As he finished, he muttered, in a hoarse voice, "The wretch!"

M. Courtois heard the exclamation. "Ah, yes, wretch indeed," he cried, "the villain who deceived my poor girl. She knew nothing of life, and when the monster whispered those fond words which quicken the beatings of all girls' hearts, she believed him. And now the scoundrel abandons her. Oh, if I only knew who he was—if I knew—" He abruptly paused—a ray of light had suddenly illuminated the depths of his despair. "Ah!" cried he, "a young girl is not abandoned like this when she has a dowry of a million francs, unless for some all-powerful reason. If love passes away, avarice remains. The scoundrel was not free—he was married. He could only be the Count de Trémoré. It is he who has killed my child." The profound silence which ensued showed him that his conjecture was shared by those around him. "I was blind, blind!" he cried. "For I received him at my house, and called him my friend. Oh, I have a right to a terrible vengeance?" And then remembering the crime at Valfeuillu, he added, in a tone of bitter disappointment: "No. I cannot even avenge her. The scoundrel is dead, murdered by men less villainous than himself."

It was in vain that the doctor and M. Plantat strove to comfort the unhappy father, who, excited more and more by the sound of his own voice, still continued to lament his loss. He was reminded of the time when Laurence was a child, and played about his knees. He recalled her voice, her smile,

her sunny hair. Ah! if she had only confided in him, he would have forgiven—forgotten everything—and loved her yet. They might have left Orcival and settled far away. Happiness would still have been their lot, for was he not wealthy? Alas! all his wealth had not prevented his daughter from killing herself. And he could not even tell whether he should ever recover her corpse. He thought of the Valfeuilu tragedy—of the countess's body found in the mire on the river-bank that morning, but could he ever hope to find Laurence's remains? At the thought that he might never be able to give her cold lips one last kiss, he hid his face with his hands and sobbed aloud.

M. Lecoq, although a Stoic on principle and by profession, could not witness this display of paternal grief unmoved. Stepping out of the shadow where he had been standing, he turned towards the mayor, and exclaimed: "I, Lecoq, of the detectives, give you my word of honour that I will find Laurence's body."

Poor M. Courtois grasped at this promise as desperately as a drowning man at a straw. "Yes, do help me," said he. "They say that nothing is impossible to the police—that they see and know everything. We will find out what has become of my child." Then taking Lecoq by the hand, he added: "I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I received you ill when I first saw you, and judged you with foolish pride: forgive me. We will succeed, you will see—we will aid each other, we will put all the police on the scent, we will search through France; money will do it—I have millions of francs—take them—" His energies were exhausted, and staggering back, he fell heavily on to the sofa.

"He must not remain here any longer," muttered the doctor; "he must be got to bed. I shouldn't be surprised at a brain fever after such excitement."

Papa Plantat at once approached Madame Courtois, who was still reclining in the arm-chair, absorbed in her own grief and unconscious of what was going on. "Madame!" said he, "madame!"

She shuddered, and rising with a wandering air, exclaimed: "It is my fault—my miserable fault! A mother should read her daughter's heart like a book. I did not even suspect Laurence's secret; I am a most unhappy mother."

"Madame," interrupted the doctor in an imperious tone, "your husband must be persuaded to go to bed at once. His condition is very serious, and a little sleep is absolutely necessary. I will have a draught prepared—"

"Oh, my Lord!" cried the poor woman, wringing her hands, in fear of a new misfortune, as bitter as the first. Her apprehensions had at least some utility, for they restored her presence of mind. She called the servants to assist the mayor in reaching his room, and followed them herself, accompanied by the doctor.

Only three persons now remained in the drawing-room—Plantat, Lecoq, and Robelot, the last named still standing in his corner near the door. "Poor Laurence!" murmured Plantat. "Poor girl!"

"It seems to me that her father is most to be pitied," remarked M. Lecoq. "Such a blow, at his age, may be more than he can bear. Even should he recover, his life is broken."

"I had a sort of presentiment," said the other, "that this misfortune would happen. I had guessed Laurence's secret, but I guessed it too late."

"And yet you did not try—"

"What? Remember that great circumspection is necessary in a delicate

case like this, when the honour of a family depends on a word. What could I do? Put Courtois on his guard? Clearly not. He would have refused to believe me. He is one of those men who will listen to nothing, and whom the brutal fact alone can undeceive."

"You might have dealt with the Count de Trémoré."

"The count would either have denied everything, or asked me what right I had to interfere in his affairs."

"But the girl?"

M. Plantat sighed heavily. "Though I detest mixing up with what doesn't concern me," he replied, "I did try one day to talk with her. With infinite precaution and delicacy, and without letting her see that I knew everything, I tried to show her the danger with which she was threatened."

"And what did she reply?"

"Nothing. She laughed and bantered, like women who have a secret they wish to conceal always do. Besides, I could not get a quarter of an hour alone with her, although I was no doubt her best friend. Previously not a day passed without her coming to my garden to cull my rarest flowers. She had instituted me her florist-in-ordinary, and it was for her that I began my collection of Cape briars." Lecoq smiled at some thought of his own as Papa Plantat talked on, but the latter did not notice him, and was about to proceed when, hearing a noise in the hall, he looked up and perceived Robelot for the first time. "Ah, *you* were there, were you?" he said, looking greatly annoyed.

The bone-setter smiled obsequiously. "Yes, monsieur, quite at your service."

"You have been listening, eh?"

"Oh, as to that, I was waiting to see if Madame Courtois had any further need of me."

A sudden thought occurred to M. Plantat, and the expression of his eyes changed. He winked at M. Lecoq to attract his attention, and addressing the bone-setter in a milder tone, asked him to approach. M. Lecoq had read Robelot at a glance. Although short and apparently slight, he was really a man of great strength. His hair, cut short behind, fell in front over a high, intelligent forehead. His eyes habitually sparkled with covetousness, and a sly smile was always playing about his thin lips. Seen a short way off, he looked, with his slight figure and his clean shaven face, just like some overgrown Parisian gamin—one of those young wretches who are the essence of all corruption, and whose imaginations are as foul as the gutters in which they hunt for lost coppers.

Robelot made several steps forward, smiling and bowing. "Perhaps," said he, "monsieur has some need of me?"

"None whatever, Master Robelot. I only wish to congratulate you on having bled M. Courtois so appropriately. Your lancet has, no doubt, saved his life."

"It's quite possible."

"M. Courtois is a generous man, and he will amply remunerate you for this great service."

"Oh, I shall not ask him for anything. Thank God! I want nobody's help. My due suffices me."

"I know that well enough, for you are prosperous and ought to be satisfied." M. Plantat's tone was friendly, almost paternal. He was evidently deeply interested in Robelot's prosperity.

"Satisfied!" resumed the bone-setter. "Not so much as you might think. Life is a very costly matter for poor folks."

"But haven't you just purchased an estate near Evry?"

"Yes."

"And a nice place, too, though a trifle damp. However, it can be set right with a few cartloads of stone and gravel, and you've got plenty of that on the land you bought from Widow Frapesle."

Robelot had never seen M. Plantat so talkative and familiar, and he seemed a little surprised. "Three wretched pieces of land!" said he.

"Not so bad as you say. Then you've also bought something in the way of mine shares, haven't you?"

"Just a package of nothing at all."

"True, but they pay well. It isn't so bad, you see, to be a doctor without a diploma."

Robelot had several times been prosecuted for illegal practicing; but he could not allow this remark to pass without a protest. "If I cure people," said he, "I'm not paid for it."

"Then it isn't your trade in herbs that has enriched you."

The conversation was becoming a cross-examination, and the bone-setter began to feel restless. "Oh, I make something out of the herbs," he answered.

"Yes, and as you are thrifty, you lay out your money in land."

"I've got some cattle and horses besides, which bring in something. I raise horses, cows, and sheep."

"Also without diploma?"

"Oh, it isn't a piece of parchment that makes one learned," replied Robelot disdainfully. "I don't fear the folks from the schools. I study animals in the fields and the stable, and the people about here will tell you that I haven't my equal for raising them, or for knowing their diseases."

M. Plantat's tone grew more winning than ever. "I know you are a clever fellow, full of experience," said he. "Dr. Gendron, with whom you served, was praising your cleverness only a little while ago."

The bone-setter shuddered, but not so imperceptibly as to escape Plantat's notice. "Yes," said he, "the good doctor said he never had so intelligent an assistant as you were. 'Robelot,' said he, 'has such an aptitude for chemistry, and so much taste for it besides, that he understands and appreciates many of the most delicate operations as much as I do.'"

"Parbleu! I did my best, for I was well paid, and I was always fond of learning."

"And you were an apt scholar at Dr. Gendron's, Master Robelot. Some of his studies are very curious indeed. His experiments with poisons are especially remarkable."

Robelot's uneasiness was apparent; and his look wavered as he answered, "Yes, I've seen him make some strange experiments."

"Well, you see, you may think yourself lucky—for the doctor is going to have a splendid chance to study this sort of thing, and no doubt he will want you to assist him again."

Robelot was too shrewd not to have already guessed that this cross-examination had a purpose. What was M. Plantat after? he asked himself, not without a vague terror. And, revolving in his mind the questions which had been asked, the answers he had given, and the inference that might be drawn from them, he trembled. In hopes of escaping any

further questioning he answered : "I am always at my old master's orders, when he needs me."

"He'll need you, you may be sure," said M. Plantat ; and in a tone of assumed carelessness, which a keen glance at Robelot belied, he added, "Great interest will attach to the case, and the task will be difficult. M. Sauvresy's body is to be disinterred."

Robelot was certainly prepared for something strange, and had armed himself with all his courage. But this name of Sauvresy fell upon his head like a blow from a club, and he could only stammer, "Sau-vre-sy !"

M. Plantat had already averted his glance. "Yes, Sauvresy is to be exhumed," he continued indifferently. "It is suspected that his death was not quite natural. You see justice always has its suspicions." Robelot leant against the wall for support, while M. Plantat proceeded : "So Doctor Gendron has been applied to. As you know, he has found certain reactive drugs which prove the presence of any alkaloid, whatever it may be, in the substances submitted to him for analysis. He has spoken to me of a certain sensitive paper—"

Appealing to all his energy, Robelot had compelled himself to stand erect and to resume a placid countenance. "I know Doctor Gendron's process," said he, "but I don't see who could entertain the suspicions you speak of."

"I think there are more than suspicions," resumed M. Plantat. "Madame de Trémoré, you know, has been murdered : her papers have, of course, been examined, and letters have been found among them, with very damaging revelations, receipts, and so on."

Although his limbs still trembled, Robelot had apparently recovered mental self-possession. "Bah !" said he : "let us hope that justice is in the wrong." Then with a wonderful power of will he constrained his thin lips to smile, and added, "Madame Courtois does not come down ; so as I am waited for at home, I'll be off now, and drop in again to-morrow. Good evening, gentlemen." He left the room, and could soon be heard crossing the court-yard. He was staggering like a drunken man.

M. Lecoq went up to M. Plantat, and taking off his hat, exclaimed—"I surrender, and bow to you ; you are a man like my master, the great Tabaret !" The detective's *amour-propre* and professional zeal were fairly roused. He found himself in presence of a great crime—one of those crimes which triple the sale of the daily newspapers. No doubt many of its particulars were still unknown to him. He was notably ignorant of the starting-point ; but at all events the way was clearing. He had surprised Plantat's theory, and had followed the latter's train of thought step by step, by this means discovering that the crime which seemed so simple to M. Domini was a very complicated affair indeed. His subtle mind had easily connected the various incidents and items of information which had come to his knowledge during the day, and he now sincerely admired the old Justice of the Peace. Gazing at his beloved portrait, he mused, "Between the two of us—this old fox and I—we will find our way right through the maze." At all events, however, he must not show himself to be inferior to his companion. "Monsieur," said he, "I wasn't wasting my time while you were questioning this rogue, who, by the way, will be very useful to us. In looking about, under the furniture and so on, I've found the envelope of the young lady's letter. Do you know where the aunt she was visiting lives?"

"At Fontainebleau, I believe,"

"Ah, well, this envelope was stamped at the Saint-Lazare post-office, in Paris. I know this stamp proves nothing—"

"It is, of course, an indication."

"However, that is not everything ; I have read the letter itself—it was lying here on the table." M. Plantat frowned involuntarily. "It was, perhaps, a liberty," resumed M. Lecoq, "but the end justifies the means. Well, you have read this letter ; but have you studied it, examined the handwriting, weighed the words, and remarked the context of the sentences?"

"Ah," cried Plantat ; "I was not mistaken then—you were struck with the same idea as myself : " And in his excitement he grasped the detective's hands as warmly as if Lecoq had been an old friend.

They were about to resume their conversation when Dr. Gendron reappeared. "Courtois is better," said he, "he is in a doze and will recover."

"Then we have nothing more to keep us here," rejoined M. Plantat. "Let's be off. M. Lecoq must be dying of hunger."

As they left the room the detective slipped Laurence's letter, with the envelope, into his pocket.

X.

M. PLANTAT's house was of modest proportions—in fact, a true philosopher's abode. It comprised three largish rooms on the ground floor, four on the floor above, and a couple of attics under the roof for the servants. It was easy to see that it was the residence of a man who had for years withdrawn from the world into himself. The once elegant furniture had grown extremely shabby. The varnish had worn away ; in places the *plaque* work had peeled off ; the curtains had faded by exposure to the sun ; the chair-coverings were well-nigh threadbare, and the clocks were all out of order. The only room that seemed at all cared for was the library, where rows of books were ranged along oaken shelves, while on a table near the fireplace lay M. Plantat's more favourite works, his everyday companions. The only luxury he had allowed himself was a spacious conservatory, fitted with every accessory and convenience, and in which he had collected a hundred and thirty-seven varieties of briars. He kept two servants—one was a widow named Petit, who acted as his cook and housekeeper, and the other, Louis, his gardener. Their presence lent but little animation to the house, for Plantat, who carefully bridled his own tongue, was equally determined not to let those about him chatter. Louis had willingly complied with his master's resolution, but not so Madame Petit, who was by nature a very talkative woman, so talkative indeed that when she found no neighbour to chat with, she went to confession, compelling the village priest to listen, in spite of himself, to all the gossip of the neighbourhood. She had vowed over and over again that she would not remain in M. Plantat's service, but the thought of an annuity after his death had always deterred her from leaving. By degrees she had accustomed herself to keep tolerably quiet in the house, seeking compensation for this enforced silence among the neighbours as soon as she crossed the threshold.

On the day of the Valfeuilu tragedy, the worthy woman was well-nigh driven to distraction. After going down into the village, ostensibly to make some purchases, but in reality to try and pick up some news, she returned at eleven o'clock and began to prepare her master's *déjeuner*. To

her surprise, however, he did not put in an appearance. She waited till one o'clock, two o'clock, five o'clock, keeping her water boiling for the eggs all the while, and there were yet no signs of her master. It then occurred to her to send Louis out to look for him, but as Louis was neither talkative nor inquisitive, he suggested that she should go herself. In the meanwhile the house was being besieged by all the female neighbours who, imagining that Madame Petit would be well informed, came to her for news. The worthy woman was naturally disgusted at having no news to give. Towards five o'clock, abandoning all thoughts of breakfast, she began to prepare for dinner; but eight o'clock struck and M. Plantat had not returned. By nine Madame Petit had worked herself up to such a pitch of excitement that she began to pick a quarrel with Louis, who, after watering the garden, sat at the kitchen table, complacently eating a plate of soup. The discussion had just begun when the bell rang. "Ah, there's monsieur at last," quoth Madame Petit, but on opening the door she only perceived a little boy, whom M. Plantat had despatched from Valfeuilu to inform her that he would soon return with two guests, who would dine and sleep at the house. The worthy woman nearly fainted. It was the first time that M. Plantat had invited any one to dinner for five years. To Madame Petit's mind it was altogether so mysterious that anger and curiosity fairly got the better of her. "To order dinner at this hour," she grumbled. "Why he must be crazy!" But reflecting that there was no time to spare, she bade Louis wring three chickens' necks at once, seek for some ripe grapes in the conservatory, and fetch some wine up from the cellar. The dinner was already well advanced when the bell rang again; this time announcing Baptiste, with M. Lecoq's bag. "Take this," growled he in a sulky tone. "It belongs to a person who is with your master."

"What person?"

"How do I know? Some spy sent from Paris about this Valfeuilu affair; not of much account probably—an ill-bred, brutish wretch."

"But he's not alone with monsieur?"

"No; Dr. Gendron is with them."

Madame Petit burned to get some news out of Baptiste; but Baptiste also burned to get back and ascertain what was going on at his master's—so off he went, without leaving any news behind him. Another hour or more passed by, and Madame Petit had just angrily informed Louis that she was going to throw the dinner out of the window, when her master at last arrived with his guests. They had not exchanged a word since leaving the mayor's—not merely because they were tired, but because they wished to reflect and regain their self-possession. Madame Petit found it useless to question their faces—they told her nothing. But she did not agree with Baptiste in his estimation of M. Lecoq, whom she thought good-natured, though perhaps rather silly. M. Plantat and his guests were less taciturn at the dinner-table, but, as if by arrangement, all three avoided any allusion to the events of the day. On hearing them talk so calmly on indifferent topics, no one would have imagined that they were so deeply interested in the Valfeuilu drama. From time to time, perhaps, a question remained unanswered, or a reply came tardily; but these were the only apparent signs of the mental pre-occupation which they had momentarily determined to dissimulate. Louis, with his napkin thrown over his arm, glided to and fro behind the diners, handing dishes and passing the wine. Madame Petit, with her ears wide open, brought in the various courses, entering the room quite thrice as often as was necessary, and leaving

the door ajar as often as she dared. Poor woman! she had prepared an excellent dinner, and nobody paid any attention to it. M. Lecocq was ordinarily fond of tit-bits and *primeurs*; and yet, when Louis placed some superb grapes on the table, his mouth did not so much as expand into a smile. Dr. Gendron would have been puzzled to say what he had eaten. When the dinner was nearly over, M. Plantat grew annoyed at the constraint caused by the servants' presence. "You may give us our coffee in the library," said he to the cook; "and you may then go to bed, as well as Louis."

"But these gentlemen don't know their rooms," insisted Madame Petit, whose eavesdropping projects were thwarted by this order. "They will, perhaps, need something."

"I'll show them their rooms," said M. Plantat dryly. "And if they need anything, I shall be here."

They then went into the library, and M. Plantat produced a box of cigars. "You two gentlemen may go to bed if you like," remarked M. Lecocq, lighting a weed; "I'm condemned, I see, to a sleepless night. But before I begin writing, I should like to ask you a few questions, M. Plantat." The latter bowed in token of assent. "We must resume our conversation," continued the detective, "and compare our inferences. It is only by combining our efforts that we can hope to throw a little light on this affair, which is one of the most mysterious I have ever met with. The situation is dangerous, and time presses. The fate of several innocent persons, against whom very serious charges have been brought, depends on our sagacity. We may have a theory, but M. Domini has another, and his, we must confess it, is based on material facts, while ours only rests on deductions and inferences."

"We have more than inferences," replied M. Plantat.

"I agree with you," said the doctor; "but we must prove it is so."

"And I *will* prove it," cried M. Lecocq eagerly. "The affair is no doubt complicated and difficult, but so much the better! If it were a simple matter, I would go back to Paris at once, and send you one of my men to-morrow. I leave easy riddles to children. My delight is a seemingly inexplicable enigma, so as to solve it; a struggle, so as to show my strength; and plenty of obstacles, so as to conquer them." M. Plantat and the doctor looked steadily at the detective, who almost seemed transfigured. His lank hair and yellow whiskers were unchanged, but his tone of voice and the expression of his features were no longer the same as heretofore. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, his gesture was full of authority, and it was in ringing accents that he resumed. "You are right, gentlemen, if you think they don't turn out detectives like me every day in the year. When I was a youngster, after a long course of study, I obtained employment of an astronomer, who utilized me as a calculator to work out the details of his mathematical problems. He gave me my breakfasts and seventy francs a-month, and in return I covered I don't know how many square feet of paper with figures every day." M. Lecocq puffed vigorously at his cigar for a moment, and glanced inquisitively at M. Plantat. "Well," said he, after a pause, "you may imagine that I wasn't the happiest of men. I forgot to mention that I had two little vices—I loved women, and I loved play. No man is perfect. My salary seemed too small, and while I added up my columns of figures, I was looking about for some means to make my fortune rapidly. There was but one means of doing so. I must appropriate somebody else's money, skilfully enough so as not to be detected. I thought over the matter day and night. My mind

was fertile in expedients, and I formed a hundred projects, each of them more or less practicable. I should frighten you if I were to tell you half the ideas I entertained in those times. If many thieves of my calibre existed, you'd have to blot the word 'property' out of the dictionary. Safes would be of no avail, and all precautions would be useless. But fortunately for men of property, almost all criminals are idiots. One day I grew afraid of my own thoughts. I had just been inventing a little plan by which a fellow could rob any banker of 200,000 francs or so without any more danger or difficulty than I encounter in raising this cup of coffee. So I said to myself, 'Well, my boy, if this goes on a little longer, a moment will come when you will naturally proceed from idea to practice.' Having, however, been born an honest lad—a mere chance—and wishing to utilize the talents nature had given me, I bid my astronomer good morning a week afterwards, and went to the Prefecture. My fear of becoming a criminal drove me into the police."

"And you are satisfied with the exchange?" asked Dr. Gendron.

"I' faith, doctor, my first regret is yet to come. I am happy, because I am able to exercise my peculiar faculties with usefulness to the community at large. Existence is extremely attractive to me, for I have one passion which overrides all others—curiosity." The detective smiled to himself, and continued—"There are people who have a mania for theatrical productions, but for myself I can't understand how it is possible to find enjoyment in a wretched display of fiction, which is as much like real life as a tallow candle is like the sun. How can one really laugh at the witticisms of an actor whom one knows to be the struggling father of a family, with children at home waiting for his meagre salary to buy a loaf of bread? How can one possibly pity the sad fate of the poor tragedienne who poisons herself on the stage, and whom one meets outside a few moments afterwards, stepping, all smiles and laughter, into some lover's carriage to be whirled away to supper and champagne? Why, your theatres are rank delusions! Give me genuine comedies and dramas. My theatre is—society. My actors laugh with real mirth, or weep with genuine tears. A crime is committed—that is the prologue; I reach the scene; the first act begins. At a glance I note the scenery. Then I try to divine the motive of the crime; I group the various characters together, and link the different episodes to the central fact. The action soon reaches a crisis; the thread of my inductions enables me to name the guilty person; I search for him, arrest him, and deliver him up. Then comes the great scene; he struggles, resorts to every device in hopes of cheating justice; but the examining magistrate, armed with the weapons I have forged for him, overwhelms the scoundrel; he does not confess, but he is confounded. And then round the principal personage all kinds of secondary characters are grouped—accomplices, perhaps friends, enemies, witnesses of every description. Some of them may excite alarm, others claim respect, and others again are simply grotesque. The horrible always has its ludicrous side. My last scene is the assize court. The public prosecutor speaks, but his ideas are mine. His oratory is so much embroidery set round the canvas of my report. At last the presiding judge submits his questions to the jury; the fate of my drama is to be decided. Perhaps the jury answers, 'Not guilty,' and that means my piece was bad, and I must allow myself to be hissed; but if the verdict's 'Guilty,' then the piece was good, I am victorious, and receive my meed of applause. The next day I can go and see my hero, slap him on the shoulder, and say, 'You have lost, old fellow; I was one too much for you!'"

Was M. Lecoq in earnest now, or was he playing a part? What was the object of this autobiography? Without appearing to notice the surprise of his companions, he took the lamp from off the table and lit a fresh cigar at the glass funnel; then with an air of apparent carelessness he placed the lamp on one corner of the mantelshelf—the effect being that while M. Plantat's features remained in full view, the detective's were lost in shadow. "Without boasting," continued M. Lecoq, "I haven't often been hissed; though, of course, like all men, I have my weak points. I have conquered the demon of play, but not my passion for women." He sighed heavily, with an air of resignation. "Yes," said he, "it's like that, and there's one woman above all others in whose presence I'm only an idiot. I may be the terror of thieves and murderers; I may have detected the most skilful sharpers; I may have measured all the depths of human infamy; seen everything, and heard everything in the world of vice and crime for the last ten years, and yet with that woman I am more simple and credulous than a child. She deceives me before my eyes, and yet she proves that I have seen wrongly. She lies—I know it, and prove it to her—and yet I end by believing her. I realise my weakness, but then this passion of mine is one of those that age, far from extinguishing, only fans, and to which the consciousness of shame and powerlessness adds fire. A man loves, and the certainty that he cannot be loved in return begets a grief which one must have felt to know its acuteness. In a moment of reason the sufferer may perhaps judge the situation rightly; he says, no, it's impossible, she is almost a child, and I am almost an old man. He says this, and yet all the while there lingers in his heart a ray of hope, which is stronger than reason, will, or experience; and he says to himself—'Who knows—perhaps!' He waits for what—a miracle? There are none nowadays; but no matter, he still hopes on."

The detective, who had uttered these words in a mournful tone, now paused as if emotion prevented him from proceeding. Papa Plantat was evidently greatly disturbed. He had continued smoking in mechanical fashion, but his features had become contracted, and his glance unsteady, while his hands perceptibly trembled. Rising to his feet, he removed the lamp from the mantelshelf, replaced it on the table, and sat down again. The significance of this scene at last struck Dr. Gendron. In short, M. Lecoq, without departing widely from the truth, had just accomplished one of the most daring experiments of his repertoire, and as he now knew what he wished to know, he considered it useless to carry the matter further. After a moment's silence, he shuddered as though awakening from a bad dream, and pulling out his watch, exclaimed, "Good heavens! how the time flies, while I chat on."

"And Guespin is in prison," remarked the doctor.

"We will have him out," answered the detective; "for I have now virtually mastered the mystery. There is only one fact of importance that I cannot explain by myself."

"What is that?" asked M. Plantat.

"Is it possible that M. de Trémoré had a very great interest in finding something—a deed, a letter, a paper of some kind—something small concealed in his own house?"

"Yes—that is possible," rejoined M. Plantat.

"But I must know for certain."

M. Plantat reflected for a moment. "Well, then, said he, "I may perhaps venture to tell you that I am sure, perfectly sure, that if Madame de

Trémoré had died suddenly, the count would have ransacked the house to find a certain paper, which he knew to be in his wife's possession, and which I myself have had in my hands."

"Then," said M. Lecoq, "there's the drama complete. On reaching Valfeuilla, I was struck with the frightful disorder of the rooms, just as you were; but I thought at first that this disorder had been created by design. I was wrong, however, as a more careful scrutiny showed me. It is true that the murderer threw everything into disorder, broke the furniture, and hacked the chairs, so as to make us think that some furious villains had been in the house; but, besides all these traces of premeditated violence, I found others. They told me that a minute, and I might almost say a patient, search, had been carried out. At first sight, it seemed as if everything had been turned topsy-turvy by chance; cupboard doors, which one might have easily opened with one's hands, had been hacked to pieces with the hatchet; drawers which were not shut had been forced in similar style, and the same was the case with others which had their keys in their locks. But all this was not folly, for every corner and crevice in which a letter might have been hidden had been examined. In the narrow spaces between the drawers I found the marks of fingers imprinted in the dust. As for the books, thrown pell-mell on to the floor, they had all been handled, and some of them with such violence that their bindings were torn off. Even the coverings of the mantel shelves had been lifted up, and the chairs had been hacked with a sword, not merely for the sake of ripping the cloth, but so as to see if anything was concealed underneath. My suspicions were first roused when I noted these signs of a desperate search. Originally I was of opinion that the villains had been hunting for the money which they knew was in the house, and that they did not belong to the household."

"But they might belong to the house," observed the doctor, "and yet not know where the money was hidden; for Guespin—"

"Allow me," interrupted M. Lecoq, "I will explain myself. On the other hand, I subsequently found indications which led me to conclude that the murderer must have been closely connected with Madame de Trémoré—her lover or her husband. And now that M. Plantat informs me that something else than booty may have been the object of the search, I really believe that the culprit is the very man whose body is being searched for—Count Hector de Trémoré."

Both M. Plantat and Dr. Gendron had divined the detective's conclusion before he spoke, but neither of them had dared to give utterance to his suspicions. They expected this name of Trémoré; and yet they shuddered on hearing it pronounced. "Allow me to add," said M. Lecoq, when his listeners had recovered from their emotion, "that such is only my personal belief. I only consider the count's guilt as probable, but between us we may prove it to be certain. We must go back to the beginning, examine each circumstance and incident, and see if they tally with this assumption of the Count de Trémoré's guilt."

He was about to continue, when Dr. Gendron, who was sitting near the open window, rose abruptly to his feet, and exclaimed, "Isn't there some one in the garden?"

They all approached the window. It was a clear summer's night, and a large open space was offered to their view. Everything was quite still outside, and no one could be perceived. "You are mistaken, doctor," said Plantat, resuming his arm-chair.

"Now let us suppose," resumed M. Lecoq, "that certain events, which

we will examine presently, had determined M. de Trémorel to get rid of his wife. When the count resolved upon this crime, he must have reflected, and tried to devise some method of committing it with impunity. Let us assume, also, that the reasons which led him to this extremity were such that he feared to be disturbed, and that he also dreaded a search for certain things, documents if you like, even in the event of his wife dying a natural death."

"That's true," said M. Plantat, nodding his head.

"M. de Trémorel, then, determined to kill his wife, brutally, with a dagger, intending to arrange things afterwards, so as to make it appear as if he had been assassinated as well; and he also decided to try and cast all suspicion on an innocent person, or at least on an accomplice infinitely less guilty than himself. When he resolved upon this course, he also made up his mind to disappear and change his name—in short, to blot Count Hector de Trémorel out of the book of life, and begin existence over again with a new position and identity. If you admit these suppositions, they will suffice to explain the whole series of otherwise inconsistent circumstances. They show us, in the first place, how it happened that on the very night of the murder there was a large fortune in ready money at Valfeuilu; and this point seems to me decisive. In ordinary circumstances, when a man receives such a sum, and proposes to keep it by him, he conceals the fact as carefully as possible. But M. de Trémorel did not have this common prudence. He shows his bundles of bank-notes freely, handles them, parades them, so to say, and the servants see them and almost touch them. He seemingly wishes every one to know that there is a large sum of money in the house, easy to take, carry off, and conceal. And he discloses this fact at the very moment when he knows, and when every one in the neighbourhood knows, that he is going to pass the night at the château alone with Madame de Trémorel. For he is aware that all his servants are invited to spend the evening of the 8th of July at the wedding of his old cook—so well aware of it indeed that he defrays the wedding expenses himself, and has even named the day. You will perhaps say that this money was sent to Valfeuilu by chance, on the very night of the crime. At the worst that might be admitted. But, believe me, there was no chance about it, and I will prove there was none. We will go to-morrow to the count's banker, and ask whether the count did not ask him, either by letter or word of mouth, to send him these funds precisely on the 8th of July. If he says yes, if he shows us a letter to that effect, or declares that the money was called for in person, you will, no doubt, confess that I have more than a probability in favour of my theory."

Both listeners nodded in token of assent.

"So far, then, there is no objection?"

"Not the least," said M. Plantat.

"My conjectures have also the advantage of shedding some light on Guespin's position. Appearances are certainly against him, and justify his arrest; and for my own part, I cannot as yet decide whether he was a minor accomplice or altogether innocent. One thing is certain, however—he was the count's victim. I would wager that M. de Trémorel knew this fellow's history, and thought that his antecedents would heighten suspicion against him. Moreover, the count may have said to himself that Guespin would certainly prove his innocence in the end; and he—the count—no doubt only wished to gain time so as to elude the first search. It is impossible that we can be deceived. We know that the countess died, as if thunder-

struck, after the first blow was dealt her. She did not struggle, so she couldn't have torn a piece of cloth off her murderer's coat. If you admit Guespin's guilt, you admit that he was idiot enough to put a piece of his coat in his victim's hand; you admit that he was such a fool as to go and throw this ragged, bloodstained garment into the Seine, from a bridge, in a place where he might know search would be instituted—and all this without taking the common precaution of filling the pockets with stones so as to carry it to the bottom. That would be absurd; and for precisely that reason the fragment of cloth and the bloodstained coat prove Guespin's innocence and the count's guilt."

"But," objected Dr. Gendron, "if Guespin is innocent, why doesn't he talk? Why doesn't he prove an *alibi*? How was it he had his purse full of money?"

"Oh, I won't say that Guespin was innocent of all connivance—involuntary connivance"—rejoined M. Lecoq. "Remember that we are only discussing the probabilities. The count, having sufficient perfidy to entrap his servant, may also have been shrewd enough to deprive him of all means of proving an *alibi*. We have several indications to show us that the count was a shrewd man. His plan was excellent, and shows a superior kind of perversity. But then it was conceived and matured in safety, whereas, after the crime, the count, frightened at the danger he was incurring, lost his head, and only imperfectly carried out his intentions. This explains at once the superiority of the design, and the imperfections of the execution. But there are other suppositions. It might be asked whether Guespin was not committing some other crime elsewhere while Madame de Trémoré was being murdered?" This conjecture seemed so improbable to the doctor that he could not forbear objecting to it. "Don't forget," replied Lecoq, "that the field of conjecture is boundless. Imagine whatever complication you like, I am ready to maintain that such a complication has occurred or will present itself some day. Lieuben, a German lunatic, bet that he would succeed in turning up a pack of cards in a certain order stated in a written agreement. He turned and turned ten hours per day for twenty years. He had repeated the operation 4,246,028 times, when he succeeded."

M. Lecoq was about to proceed with another example when M. Plantat interposed. "I admit your suppositions," said he; "I think they are more than probable—they are true."

"Now," resumed M. Lecoq, as he paced up and down between the window and the book-shelves with an easy step, a bright glance, and emphatic air. "Now listen to me. It is ten o'clock at night. No noise outside, the road deserted, the village lights extinguished, the château servants away in Paris. The count and countess are alone at Valfeuilu. They have retired into their bedroom. The countess has seated herself at the table where the tea things are served. The count chats with her while walking up and down the room. Madame de Trémoré has no forebodings; during the last few days her husband has been more amiable, more attentive than ever. She has no mistrust, so that the count can approach her from behind, without her thinking of turning her head. When she hears him coming up softly, she imagines that he is going to surprise her with a kiss. But he has armed himself with a long dagger, and stands behind her. He knows where to inflict a mortal wound. He chooses the place at a glance, and stabs her so violently that the handle of the dagger leaves a mark on both sides of the wound. The countess falls forward without a word, striking her forehead against the edge of the table, which she overturns. Cannot one thus explain the direction of the terrible wound below the left shoulder—a wound which

is almost vertical, inclined slightly from right to left?" The doctor made a gesture of assent. "And who but a woman's lover or her husband is admitted to her bedroom, or can approach her from behind without her turning round?"

"That's clear," muttered M. Plantat.

"The countess is now dead," pursued M. Lecoq. "The assassin's first feeling is one of triumph. He is at last rid of the woman who was his wife, whom he hated enough to murder her, enough to change an existence which everybody envied for the career of an outlaw—for henceforth he must be without country, friend, or refuge, proscribed by all nations, tracked by all the police, punishable by the laws of all the civilized world! His second thought is for this letter or paper, this document which he knows to be in his wife's keeping, which he has asked for a hundred times, which she would not give up to him, and which he must have. He thinks he knows where it is. He imagines that he can put his hand on it at once. He is mistaken. He looks into all the drawers and cupboards used by his wife—and finds nothing. He searches every corner, he lifts up the shelves, overturns everything in the room—still nothing! An idea strikes him. Is this letter under the mantel shelf? By a turn of the arm he lifts it—down the clock tumbles and stops. It is not yet half-past ten."

"Yes," murmured the doctor, "the clock betrays that."

"The count finds nothing under the mantel shelf except dust, on which I myself found his finger marks. Then he begins to grow anxious. Where can this paper be, for which he has risked his life? He grows angry. The keys of such drawers as are locked are lying on the carpet. I found them among the broken cups and saucers—but he does not see them. He must have some implement to break the drawers open with at once, and so he goes down stairs for a hatchet. His thirst for blood and vengeance is already quenched, and now his terrors begin. All the dark corners are peopled with spectres; he is frightened despite himself, and hurries on. He soon comes upstairs again, armed with a hatchet—the one that was found on the second floor—and, going to work like a madman, he smashes every article of furniture right and left. But at the same time he does not neglect his search. At last he goes into his study, and continues his work of destruction. He smashes his own writing-table—remembering that it once belonged to the first husband—to Sauvresy—and perhaps the document he is hunting for may be concealed between the woodwork. But no—he still finds nothing. In the library he takes all the books one by one from the shelves, shakes them furiously, and throws them about over the floor. The infernal paper cannot be found. His distress is now too great for him to pursue his search with the least method. His wandering reason fails him. He staggers, without calculation, from one thing to another, fumbling a dozen times in the same drawer, and completely forgetting others close at hand. Then he thinks that this paper may have been hidden in the stuffing of some chair. He seizes a sword, and to make certain, slashes up all the chairs and sofas he can find." M. Lecoq's voice and manner lent a most realistic character to his narrative, and it might have been imagined that he had been a witness of the strange scenes he so minutely described. "At this moment," said he, while his companions listened with bated breath, "the count's rage and terror reached a climax. When he designed the murder, he resolved to kill his wife, get possession of the letter, perfect the minor features of his plan so as to avoid suspicion, and fly. And now all his projects were baffled! Time was being lost, and each

minute diminished the chances of escape! Then the possibility of a thousand dangers which had not originally occurred to him, entered his mind. Suppose some friend should suddenly arrive, expecting his hospitality, as had occurred twenty times before? What if some belated passer-by noticed a light flying from room to room? And, moreover, might not one of the servants return? While he is in the drawing-room, he fancies he hears some one ringing at the gate, and such is his terror, that he lets his candle fall—for I have found the marks of candle-grease on the carpet. He hears strange noises, such as never before assailed his ears; he thinks he hears some one walking in the next room; the floor creaks. Is his wife really dead? Will she not suddenly rise to her feet again, run to the window, and scream for help? Beset by these terrors, he returns to the bedroom, seizes his dagger, and again strikes the countess. But his hand is so unsteady that the wounds are slight. You, doctor, will have observed that all these wounds take the same direction. They form right angles with the body, proving that the victim was lying down when they were inflicted. Then, in the excess of his frenzy, the count strikes the body with his feet, and his heels cause the bruises you note in your examination."

M. Lecoq paused to take breath. He not only narrated the drama, but acted it as well, each phrase being complemented by an appropriate gesture. Like all true artists of the stage who seek to identify themselves with their part, the detective really felt some of the sensations he depicted, and his tone of voice, expression, and attitude were at once strikingly realistic. "I have now given you," said he, "the first act of the drama. Let us proceed to the second. It frequently happens, when a great crime is committed, that as soon as the murderer has effected his purpose, he is animated with intense hatred against his victim, and, though the latter is dead and powerless to injure him, he wantonly mutilates the lifeless corpse. But soon afterwards comes a feeling of prostration—of irresistible torpor—so pronounced that some murderers have been known actually to fall asleep beside their victim's remains, in the very blood they have spilt. They have been surprised while yet asleep, and have only been awakened with difficulty. The count, then, after disfiguring his wife, falls into an arm-chair. I noted, on the only one left standing, signs that it had been recently occupied. His prostration is complete. He thinks of the long hours which have elapsed, and of the few which remain to him. He reflects that he has found nothing, and that he will hardly have time, before daylight, to carry out the plan by which he hopes to avert suspicion and assure his safety, by creating an impression that he himself has been murdered as well as his wife. And yet he must fly at once—fly, without that cursed paper. He summons up all his energy, rises, seizes a pair of scissors, and cuts off his long, carefully-cultivated beard."

"Ah!" exclaimed M. Plantat. "That's why you examined the portrait so closely."

"Now," continued the detective, too intent on following his deductions to note the interruption, "imagine the Count de Trémoré, standing all smeared with his wife's blood, in front of the looking-glass, soaping and shaving his pale face in the midst of the disorder he has created, while his victim's body—yet warm—lies only three steps off. Believe me, it is an act of wonderful courage to look at oneself in a glass after committing a murder—one of which few criminals are capable. The count's hands, however, trembled so violently that he could scarcely hold his razor, and he must have cut his face over and over again."

"Do you really think that the count spared the time to shave?" asked Dr. Gendron.

"I am positively sure of it—pos-i-tive-ly. I found a towel on which a razor had been recently wiped, as well as a box of razors, one of which had been recently used, for it was still moist; and I have carefully preserved both the towel and the box. And if these proofs do not suffice, I will send to Paris for two of my men, who will find, somewhere about the house or in the garden, the remnants of the count's beard. The circumstance seems to surprise you, doctor, but to me it is quite natural. M. de Trémoré had always worn a full beard; by cutting it off his appearance is so changed that if he met any one in his flight he would not be recognised. This part of his programme accomplished, the count proceeds to arrange matters so as to make it appear that he himself has been murdered as well as his wife. He hunts up Guespin's coat, tears it round about one of the pockets, and bends the countess's fingers so that they may clutch a fragment of the cloth. Then carrying her body crosswise in his arms, he goes down stairs. Blood flows freely from the many wounds he has inflicted, and leaves a gory stain at each step he takes. On reaching the foot of the staircase he is obliged to put the body down, in order to open the garden door. This explains the large stain in the hall. The count, having opened the door, returns for the body, and carries it in his arms as far as the edge of the lawn. He carries it no further, but drags it by the shoulders across the grass, walking backwards as he does so, and seeking by this means to create the impression that it is his own body which has been dragged along and thrown into the Seine. But the scoundrel overlooked two things which have betrayed him. He did not reflect that, in dragging the countess across the lawn, her heavy skirts would weigh down the grass over a considerable space; nor did he think that her small, high-heeled boots would leave an imprint in the damp soil beneath the grass, and thus reveal the device he had resorted to."

"Ah," interrupted M. Plantat, "you said nothing of that last particular before."

"Nor of several other things either. But I was ignorant then of several facts which I have mastered now; and as I had reason to suppose that you were better informed than myself, I was not sorry to have my revenge for what seemed to me your very mysterious reserve."

"Well, you have your revenge," remarked the doctor, smiling.

"On reaching the other side of the lawn," continued M. Lecoq, "the count again took his wife's body in his arms. But forgetting that, if she had fallen in a struggle, the water would have spirted all round about, or—who knows?—disliking to soil himself perhaps, he does not throw her violently on to the ground on the margin of the stream, but lays her down softly, and with infinite precaution. Still he wishes it to appear as if there had been a terrible struggle, and so he stirs up the sand with the tip of his foot, thinking that will suffice to deceive the police!"

"Yes, yes," muttered Plantat, "exactly so—I saw it."

"Having got rid of the body, the count returns to the house. Time presses, but he is still anxious to find the paper we have spoken of. He hastily completes the preparations intended to assure his safety. He smears his slippers and handkerchief with blood. He throws the latter and one of his slippers on to the grass, and the other slipper into the river. His haste explains why a really skilful plan was carried out in such imperfect style. He hurries on, committing blunder after blunder. He does not reflect that his valet will explain all about the empty bottles which he

places on the table. He thinks he is turning some dregs of wine into the five glasses, but the liquid is vinegar, and proves that no one drunk out of them. He goes up stairs again, and pushes the hands of the clock forward, forgetting, however, that, if the alarum is tested, it will not strike in accordance with the hour he has indicated. He rumples the bed so awkwardly that no one would be deceived, and besides, it is impossible to reconcile the rumpled bed, and the clock pointing to twenty minutes past three, with the countess's attire. People go to bed in their night gowns, not in full dress. However, the count adds as much as he can to the disorder of the room. He smears the bed curtains and furniture with blood. Then he marks the door with a bloody hand, indicated too distinctly and precisely not to have been done designedly. Indeed, I do not find a single circumstance which does not tally with the assumption of the count's guilt."

"There's the hatchet found on the second floor," remarked M. Plantat. "You will remember you thought its position strange."

"I am coming to that. There is one point in this mysterious affair which, thanks to you, is now clear. We know that Madame de Trémoré possessed and concealed some paper or letter which her husband wished to get hold of, but which she obstinately refused to give up despite all his entreaties. You have told us that his desire to secure this paper was a powerful motive of the crime. We may indeed assume that the possession of the document was a question of paramount importance. It must somehow have been very damaging to one or the other of them—may be to both—or perhaps only to the count. Here I am reduced to conjectures. However, it is certain that it was a source of danger—something akin to the sword of Damocles—and easy to be utilized to the detriment of the party or parties it concerned. Madame de Trémoré plainly considered this paper as a source of protection for herself, and as a weapon which kept her husband at her mercy. Now it was to rid himself of this perpetual menace that the count killed his wife."

The detective's logic was so clear that both his listeners eagerly agreed that his theory must be correct. "We will conclude then," continued M. Lecoq, "that the contents of this document, providing we can find it, will dispel our last doubts, explain the crime, and render all the murderer's precautions useless. The count, no doubt, realised all this, and was extremely anxious not to leave this danger behind him. Accordingly, when he has completed his preparations for flight, he resumes his desperate and fruitless search. Despite the growing danger of his situation, the speeding time, and coming daylight, he again examines all the furniture, the books, and papers, but in vain. Then he determines to search the second floor, and armed with his hatchet, goes up to the room where we found the windows open. He has already attacked a cupboard, when he hears a cry in the park. He rushes to the window, and to his dismay perceives Philippe and old Bertaud standing on the river bank, under the willows, near the corpse. His terror can be imagined. Now, there's not a second to lose—he has delayed too long already. Daylight is breaking, the crime is discovered, people will be coming, he is perhaps lost beyond all hope. He must fly, fly at once, at the peril of being seen, met, and arrested on his way. He flings the hatchet from him, and as it falls it cuts the floor. He rushes down stairs, slips the bank notes, which are in readiness, into his pocket, seizes Guespin's bloodstained coat, which he intends to throw into the river from the bridge, and hurries away through the garden. His brain is whirling,

he forgets all caution, and although his clothes are no doubt in disorder, stained more or less with his victim's blood, he rushes madly onward, clears the ditch, and he it is whom old Bertaud sees making for the forest of Mauprévoir, where he means to arrange his attire. For the moment he is safe. But he leaves behind him the document he was searching for—a document which will undoubtedly enlighten justice and betray his guilt. For though he failed to find it, we will do so; indeed we must, if we are to defeat M. Domini, and change our doubts into certainty."

XI.

A LONG pause followed the detective's last remarks. His listeners were perhaps seeking for objections. It was Dr. Gendron who first spoke. "I don't see Guespin's part in all this," said he.

"Nor I, very clearly," answered M. Lecoq. "And here I ought to admit that my theory has its weak side as well as its strong one. One thing is certain. I am neither half right nor half wrong. Either all my inferences are correct, or else not one of them is. It's everything or nothing. If I am right, Guespin has not been mixed up in this crime, at least directly; for there isn't a single circumstance which suggests that the count was assisted. If, on the other hand, I am wrong—" M. Lecoq paused. He seemed to have heard some unexpected noise in the garden. "But I am not wrong," he added. "I have still other evidence against the count which I haven't spoken of as yet, but which seems to me conclusive."

"Oh," cried the doctor, "what's that?"

"Two certainties are better than one, and I am always inclined to doubt. When I was left alone a moment with François, the valet, I asked him if he knew exactly how many pairs of boots and shoes his master had; he answered yes, and took me to a closet where they are kept. One pair of boots, with Russian leather tops, which the count had put on the previous morning, was missing. I looked for them carefully everywhere without finding them, and we also discovered that a blue and white necktie which the count was wearing on the 8th had disappeared as well."

"Then that proves you were right in your suppositions about the slippers and the handkerchief," cried M. Plantat.

"Yes, I think the facts we have are sufficiently established to justify one part of our theory, but let us now consider the events which must have decided—"

M. Lecoq again paused, and listened attentively. All of a sudden, without speaking a word, he sprang on to the window-sill, and bounded into the garden like a cat pouncing on a mouse. The noise of his fall was first followed by a stifled cry, and then by the sound of a struggle. The doctor and M. Plantat hastened to the open window. The dawn was breaking, the trees quivered in the early breeze, and through the white mist now hanging over the valley of the Seine the surrounding scenery could just be vaguely distinguished. The stillness of the hour would have been complete but for the repeated thud of a clenched fist, which struck home at every movement of the arm impelling it. In the centre of M. Plantat's lawn two men, or rather phantoms, were engaged in desperate combat. Presently the two forms united, then they separated, then again they blended as it were together. Suddenly one of the combatants fell—rising immediately afterwards, but only to fall again. "Don't disturb yourselves," cried a voice,

which the lookers-on recognised as that of the detective, "I've got the rogue." M. Lecoq could just be dimly seen. For a moment he remained erect, but suddenly he bent over his prostrate adversary, and the battle recommenced. The man on the ground was defending himself with the energy of despair, and the two antagonists soon formed a dark spot in the middle of the lawn, so that the lookers-on could only just distinguish sundry legs and arms kicking and lunging out alternately. All at once both antagonists rose again and struggled; and then a cry of pain, followed by a terrible oath, disturbed the surrounding stillness. "Ah! there he is," the detective's voice was heard exclaiming, "I've persuaded him to pay his respects to us—just show me a light, please!"

The doctor and his host both hastened towards the lamp, but scarcely had the former taken it from off the table when the door was abruptly pushed open. "Allow me," said M. Lecoq, "to introduce to you Master Robelet, bone-setter of Orcival, herborist by prudence, and poisoner by vocation."

The stupefaction of MM. Plantat and Gendron was such that neither of them could speak. The man whom the detective held was unmistakably the bone-setter. Lecoq had conquered him by the famous knee stroke, to which the *barrière* bullies of Paris only resort in cases of urgent need. But it was not so much Robelet's presence that surprised M. Plantat and his friend as the altered appearance of the detective. M. Lecoq wore the same clothes as a few minutes previously; they could recognise his knotted cravat and yellow-haired watch-chain; he spoke, moreover, in the same voice, and yet he no longer seemed the same man. When he jumped out of the window, he was fair-haired and luxuriantly whiskered; but now, on his return, his hair was dark and his face clean shaven. He had seemed to be rather over than under middle age, and his features had in turns assumed an idiotic and an intelligent expression. But at present he appeared as a fine young fellow of thirty-five, with a beaming eye and a sensitive lip. A splendid crop of curly black hair contrasted with the pallor of his complexion, and accentuated the firm outline of his head and face. On his neck, just underneath his chin, a wound could be detected.

"Monsieur Lecoq!" cried M. Plantat, recovering his voice at last.

"Himself," answered the detective, "and this time the true Lecoq." Then turning to Robelet, who was nervously working his jaws, he added, "Go on there!" The bone-setter fell on to a sofa hard by, Lecoq still holding him with a firm determined grasp. "Yes," continued the detective, "this rascal has robbed me of my wig and whiskers. Thanks to him, and in spite of myself, you see me with the head the Creator gave me—the head which is really my own. To tell the truth, only three persons besides yourselves really know the true Lecoq—two trusted friends, and one who is infinitely less so—she of whom I spoke a little while ago." His listeners' eyes met as if to question each other, while he continued, "After all, what can a fellow do? My profession is not altogether *couleur de rose*. The risk we incur in protecting society should entitle us to the esteem, if not to the affection of our fellow-men. Why, at this moment I am condemned to death by seven of the most dangerous criminals in France. I caught them, you see, and handed them over to justice, and since then they have sworn—and they are men of their word, mind you—that I should only die by their hands. Four of these scoundrels are at Cayenne, and one is at Brest; I've had news of them. But as for the other two, I've lost their track. Maybe that one of them has followed me here, and to-morrow, perhaps, as

I turn down some deserted road, I shall get six inches of cold steel in my stomach." He smiled sadly. "And there's virtually no reward for the dangers we have to face. Why, if I were to be killed to-morrow, they'd carry me home and bury me just as cheaply as possible." His tone had now become intensely bitter, and his features assumed an expression of irritation and rancour. "Fortunately, I have taken my precautions," he continued. "While I am performing my duties, I suspect every thing and every one, and when I am on my guard I have no fear. But there are days when a man gets tired of keeping perpetually on the watch, and would like to be able to turn a street corner without looking out for a dagger. On these occasions I become myself again. I doff my false beard, throw away my mask, and allow my real self to emerge from the hundred disguises which I assume in turn. I have been a detective fifteen years, and no one at the prefecture of police knows either my true face or the real colour of my hair."

Master Robelet, finding himself ill at ease on his lounge, was now attempting to move. "Ah, look out!" cried M. Lecoq, suddenly changing his tone. "Just get up, and tell us what you were after in the garden?"

"But you are wounded!" exclaimed Plantat, observing some stains of blood on the detective's shirt front.

"Oh, that's nothing," was the reply; "only a scratch that this fellow gave me with a huge cutlass he carried." However, M. Plantat insisted on having the wound examined, and was not satisfied until the doctor declared it to be a very slight one.

"Come, Master Robelet," said the old magistrate, "what were you doing here?" The bone-setter did not reply. "Take care," insisted M. Plantat, "your silence will confirm us in the idea that you came here with some criminal design." Still no answer. Indeed M. Plantat successively tried menace and persuasion to no effect. Robelet was obstinate, and would not open his mouth. At last Dr. Gendron, hoping, with some reason, that he might have a little influence over his former assistant, questioned him in his turn. "Answer us; what did you come for?" he said.

Robelot made an effort, but his jaw was apparently broken, and he could only speak with difficulty. "I came to rob; I confess it," he gasped at last.

"To rob—what?"

"I don't know."

"But you didn't scale a wall and risk imprisonment without a definite object?"

"Well, then, I wanted—"

"What? Go on."

"To get some rare flowers in the conservatory."

"With your cutlass, hey?" asked M. Lecoq; and, noticing the dark look which Robelet gave him, he added, "You needn't look at me that way—you don't scare *me*. And don't talk like a fool, either. If you think we have less brains than you, you are mistaken—I warn you of it."

"I wanted the flower-pots," stammered the bone-setter.

"Oh, come now," cried M. Lecoq, shrugging his shoulders, "don't repeat such nonsense. What! you a man who buys large estates for cash, steal flower-pots! Tell that to some one else. You've been turned inside out to-night, my boy, like an old glove. When we were at the mayor's, in spite of yourself you let out a secret that worried you tremendously, and you came here now to get it back again. You thought perhaps that

M. Plantat had not confided it to anybody, and you wanted to prevent him from speaking again to any one in the world." Robelot made a sign of protesting. "Shut up, now," said M. Lecoq, "what about your cutlass?"

While these remarks were being exchanged, M. Plantat reflected. "Perhaps I spoke too soon," he murmured.

"Why so?" asked M. Lecoq. "I wanted a palpable proof for M. Domini; we'll give him this rascal, and if he isn't satisfied, he'll be difficult to please."

"But what shall we do with him?"

"Shut him up somewhere in the house; if necessary, I'll tie him up."

"Here's a dark closet."

"Is it secure?"

"There are thick walls on three sides, and a double door closes it on the fourth. There are no windows or apertures of any kind."

"Just the place, then," responded the detective, and when M. Plantat had opened the closet, a dark, damp recess half full of old books and papers, he pushed his prisoner inside, exclaiming, "There, in here you'll be like a little king." Robelot offered no resistance, but begged for some water and a light. A decanter of water and a glass were given to him, but the light was refused. "You must dispense with that," said M. Lecoq. "You'd be playing us some dirty trick with it."

M. Plantat secured the closet door, and then taking hold of the detective's hand, exclaimed in an earnest voice, "You have probably just saved my life, monsieur, at the peril of your own. I hope the day will come when I may—"

The detective interrupted him with a gesture. "You know how constantly I have to expose myself," said he; "once more or less doesn't matter much. Besides, it does not always serve a man to save his life." He remained pensive for a moment, and then added, "You will thank me after awhile, when I have acquired other claims to your gratitude."

At this moment, Dr. Gendron shook the detective's hand in his turn, and exclaimed, "Allow me to say how much I admire you. I had no idea of your wonderful capacity. You arrived here this morning without any previous information, and after visiting the scene of the crime, you have succeeded by mere logic in discovering the real criminal. You have indeed proved to us that the guilty man can be no other than the one you have named."

M. Lecoq bowed modestly, but in reality he was delighted with the doctor's compliments. "As you say," he answered, "I am persuaded of the Count de Trémoré's guilt; but I shall not be satisfied until I have fathomed the motive that led him, not merely to commit this crime, but also to make it appear as if he himself had also been murdered!"

"Might we not conclude," remarked the doctor, "that, disgusted with Madame de Trémoré, he got rid of her to join some other woman whom he loved to madness?"

M. Lecoq shook his head. "People don't kill their wives," said he, "merely because they are tired of them and love some other woman. They content themselves with leaving their wives in the lurch, elope with the new love, and there's an end of the matter. That happens every day, and neither the law nor public opinion are particularly severe for people who act in that fashion."

"However, didn't the Trémoré fortune belong to the wife?"

"No; not quite so. M. de Trémoré had three hundred thousand francs

of his own—the sum which his friend Sauvresy saved out of his former colossal fortune; and in addition his wife made half-a-million of francs over to him in their marriage contract. Now a man can live at ease anywhere on the income furnished by eight hundred thousand francs. Besides, the count was really master of all the funds of the estate. He could buy, sell, realize, borrow, deposit, and draw money as he pleased.” The doctor having no further objection to offer remained silent, while M. Lecoq continued, speaking with a certain amount of hesitation, and with his eyes fixed inquisitively on M. Plantat. “We must find the motive of this murder—in the past. The count and countess must have been so closely linked together by some crime that the death of one of them could alone set the other free. I suspected something of the kind early this morning, and the idea has followed me all along. In my opinion, moreover, the man we have just shut up in the closet there—Robelot—was an accomplice in the perpetration of this crime.”

The doctor who had only witnessed a portion of Lecoq’s researches at Valfeuilu, and who had been attending on M. Courtois while Robelot was being examined by M. Plantat at the mayor’s house, found it necessary to exert all his shrewdness and powers of divination to understand the detective’s allusions. But now a ray of light reached his brain, and he excitedly exclaimed, “Ah, you refer to Sauvresy!”

“Yes—to Sauvresy,” answered M. Lecoq. “The paper which the murderer hunted for so eagerly, for which he neglected his safety and risked his life, must contain the certain proof of an earlier crime.”

Both speakers seemed surprised that M. Plantat no longer took any part in the conversation. He was apparently absorbed in thought, and his wandering glance conveyed the impression that he was recalling some half forgotten episodes belonging to the distant past. After a brief pause, the detective decided to strike a bold blow. “It must indeed have been a dreadful past,” said he, “which could have driven a wealthy young man like Hector de Trémoré to plan such a crime as that of Valfeuilu in cool blood. He renounced at once his personality, position, honour, and name! And again it must have been an equally bitter past that could have driven a young girl of twenty to suicide!”

M. Plantat started to his feet, pale and quivering with emotion. “Ah,” cried he in a husky voice, “you don’t believe what you say! Laurence never knew about it, never!”

The doctor, who was closely watching the detective, fancied he saw a faint smile dart across Lecoq’s expressive features as he noted Papa Plantat’s excited manner. “You needed no trick or subterfuge,” continued the latter in a tone of mingled haughtiness and dignity, “to induce me to tell what I know. I have shown you enough esteem and confidence to deprive you of the right to use the sad secret you have surprised as an arm against me.” “Yes,” continued M. Plantat, while Lecoq listened with a somewhat disconcerted air, “the astonishing genius with which you have investigated this drama has led you to the truth. But you do not know everything, and even now I would hold my tongue, if the reasons which induced me to remain silent had not ceased to exist.” He opened a secret drawer in an old oak desk near the fireplace and took out a large packet of papers, which he laid on the table. “For four years,” he resumed, “day by day, and I might say hour by hour, I have followed the various phases of the dreadful drama which culminated in bloodshed last night at Valfeuilu. At first, I was prompted merely by my old legal curiosity, but later on I hoped to

save the life and honour of one very dear to me. Why did I say nothing of my discoveries? That, my friends, is the secret of my conscience, which does not reproach me. Besides, I closed my eyes to evidence even until yesterday; I needed the brutal testimony of this deed!"

The dawn had risen. The blackbirds flew whistling through the garden, and the sabots of the labourers going fieldward resounded on the roadway beyond. In the library the silence was only interrupted by an occasional groan from the imprisoned Robelot, and by the rustling of the leaves which M. Plantat was turning over. "Before commencing," said the latter after a long pause, "I ought to consider your weariness; we have been up for twenty-four hours—" But the others protested that they did not need repose. Curiosity triumphed over fatigue. They were at last to know the key of the mystery. "Very well," said their host, "then listen to me."

XII.

AT twenty-six years of age, Count Hector de Trémoré was an ideal man of the world—such as the term is understood by those who move in society. He was useless alike to himself and to every one else, and seemed to have been born expressly for the purpose of running riot at the expense of his own patrimony and constitution, and that of mankind at large. Young, good looking, noble, and extremely wealthy, originally endowed, moreover, with vigorous health, this last scion of an illustrious family frittered away both his youth and his fortune in the most foolish style. He enjoyed an unenviable notoriety. People talked of his stables and carriages, servants and furniture, dogs and mistresses in one breath. His cast-off horses still took prizes, and a jade, once distinguished by his notice, was eagerly sought after by all the gilded youth of Paris. He was not naturally vicious; at twenty years of age he had still a warm heart, and was even capable of experiencing generous emotions, but six years of unhealthy pleasure had corrupted him to the marrow. Such was his foolish vanity that he shrank from no excess that was calculated to foster his notoriety. He was supremely egotistic, and intoxicated by the flattery of the sycophants who lived at his expense, came to consider himself as a kind of demigod, mistaking his own cynicism for wit, and his scepticism and lofty disdain of all morality for character. Instead of having a firm and manly will, he was as capricious and as wayward as the most fickle woman. His biography was to be found in the petty journals of the day, which chronicled everything he said and did. One day they reported that, after supping at the Café de Paris, he had thrown all the plates out of the window, a feat which had cost him twenty thousand francs. On another occasion gossiping Paris learnt with stupefaction that he had eloped to Italy with a banker's wife, who had been married for nineteen years. Subsequently he fought a duel, and killed his man. A week later he was wounded in another, thus becoming a hero in Boulevardian estimation. On one occasion he went to Baden and broke the bank at the gaming tables; and another time, after playing *écarté* for sixty hours at his club, he managed to lose 120,000 francs to a Russian prince. He was one of those men whom notoriety intoxicates, who long for applause, careless as to what they are applauded for. Count Hector was positively enraptured by the noise he made in the world. It seemed to him the acme of honour and glory to have his name or initials constantly printed in the columns of the Parisian press. Still, he carefully

concealed his satisfaction, and would remark with seeming modesty, "When will they stop talking about me?"

On great occasions, he borrowed Madame Dubarry's epigram—"After me the deluge." But it so happened that the deluge came in his lifetime.

One April morning, his valet, a rascal whom he had drilled and dressed, woke him up with the announcement that a *huissier** had just arrived with the intention of seizing his furniture. Hector turned on his pillow, yawned, stretched himself, and replied, "Well, tell him to begin operations with the stables and carriage-house; and then come up and dress me." He did not seem disturbed, and the servant retired amazed by his master's coolness. The count had at least sense enough to know the state of his finances; and he had foreseen, nay, expected the visit in question. Three years before, while laid up in consequence of a fall from a horse, he had realised the depth of the gulf towards which he was hastening. He might yet have saved himself at that epoch, but to do so he must have entirely changed his mode of life, reformed his household, and borne in mind that a napoleon was worth twenty francs. However, he considered this to be too much trouble, and after a little reflection resolved to go on to the end. When the last hour came, he would fly to the other end of France, with nothing on his person to betray his identity, and blow his brains out in some forest-glade. The time had now come for him to carry out this resolution. By plunging into debt, signing and renewing bills, paying interest and compound interest, giving commissions at each new loan, Hector had frittered away the remainder of the princely heritage he had received at his father's death. The winter that had just elapsed had cost him 150,000 francs. A week previously he had tried to borrow another hundred thousand, and had failed. His application had been refused, not because his landed property was worth less than what he owed, but because a bankrupt's belongings, sold by authority of justice, never realise their true value.

Despite the bitter prospect before him, Hector received the announcement of the *huissier's* visit coolly enough, remarking to himself as he got out of bed, "Well, here's an end of it." He was just a trifle confused, but a little confusion is excusable when a man passes from wealth to beggary. With suicide staring him in the face, he determined to array himself with especial care for the last time, appropriately remembering that certain of his ancestors had gone to battle in court costume! In less than an hour he was ready. He wore his most expensive jewellery, and carried in the pocket of his overcoat a pair of tiny pistols of faultless workmanship. After dismissing his valet, he opened his desk and counted what funds he had left. Ten thousand and some hundreds of francs remained. With such a sum he might have gone on a journey, and prolonged his life for two or three months; but he disdainfully repelled any idea of covertly giving himself a reprieve. No—with these ten thousand francs he might make one last grand display of generosity which Parisian gossips would long remember. It would in his estimation be truly chivalrous to breakfast with his innamorata and present her with this money at dessert. During the meal he must be gay and cynical, and at the close of the repast calmly announce his intention of killing himself. The girl would certainly narrate the scene to every one she knew. His last conversation would be repeated

* The French *huissier* is a legal official who, in addition to other functions, performs those which in England devolve on sheriff's officers.

everywhere, and his last gift duly chronicled. In the swell cafés nothing else could be talked about, and the society journals would naturally go into raptures over this last achievement. The idea strangely excited and even comforted him. He was about to leave his room when he noticed the pile of papers collected in his desk. Perhaps there was something among them which, if examined, might weaken his resolution. To avoid such a contingency, so prejudicial to his dignity, he emptied all the drawers at random and set the contents on fire. He looked with egotistical pride on the conflagration; on the flaming bills, love letters, and business letters; on the smouldering bonds, patents of nobility, and deeds of property. Was it not his brilliant past that flickered and consumed in the fireplace? Suddenly he remembered the *huissier*, and hastily went down stairs. The official in question was the most polite of *huissiers*, a man of wit and culture, a friend of many Parisian artists, and himself a poet at times. He had already seized eight horses and five carriages, with all the accompanying harness and trappings. "I'm going on slowly, count," said he, bowing. "Perhaps you wish to stay the execution. The sum is large, to be sure, but a man in your position—"

"If you are here, it is because it suits me," interrupted Hector, haughtily, "this house doesn't suit me; I shall never enter it again. So, as you are master, do as you please." And wheeling round on his heel he went off.

The astonished *huissier* proceeded with his work. He went from room to room, admiring and seizing in turn. He seized the furniture and other appurtenances, the racing cups and the plate, the curious collections of pipes and weapons, and the many volumes in the library, which contained numerous books on sporting subjects, superbly bound.

In the meanwhile the Count de Trémoré, more than ever intent on suicide, walked along the boulevards till he reached his innamorata's house, near the Madeleine. Some six months previously he had introduced her into the *demi-monde* as Jenny Fancy. Her real name was Pélagie Taponnet, and although the count was unaware of the circumstance, she was his valet's sister. She was a lively girl, with delicate hands and tiny feet, superb chestnut hair, white teeth, and great impertinent black eyes, which assumed a languishing, caressing, or provoking expression at will. She had passed suddenly from the most abject poverty to a life of extravagant luxury; but the change did not astonish her so much as might have been expected. Forty-eight hours after reaching her new apartments, she had established order among the servants, teaching them to obey her least glance or gesture; and at the same time she imposed her taste and will on the dress-makers and milliners charged with robing her in gorgeous raiment. However, despite her magnificent toilettes and superbly upholstered apartment, she soon began to languish for new excitement. In such a sphere a woman's happiness is not complete unless seasoned by the jealousy of rivals. And Jenny's rivals lived in the Faubourg du Temple, near the barrière, unable to envy her splendour, since they no longer saw her, for she was strictly forbidden to associate with them and dazzle them as she had hoped to do. As for Trémoré, Jenny submitted to him from necessity. He seemed to her the most tiresome of men, and his friends were, in her opinion, the dreariest of beings. Despite their affected politeness she no doubt discerned their contempt for her, and realised of what little consequence she was to these prodigal, and at the same time egotistical, men of the world. Midnight suppers and cardplaying, were no doubt very pleasant in their way, and yet at times Jenny suffered acutely from ennui. Over

and over again she was on the point of leaving Trémoré, abandoning all this luxury, and resuming her old life. Many a time she resolved to pack up; but her vanity always checked her from doing so at the last moment. On the morning spoken of, Hector de Trémoré rung at her door at eleven o'clock. She did not expect him so early, and was evidently surprised when he told her he had come to breakfast, and asked her to hasten the cook, as he was in a hurry. She thought she had never seen him so amiable and gay. Throughout the meal he was full of spirit and fun, in accordance with his resolution. At last, while they were sipping their coffee, he spoke as follows:—"All this, my dear, is a mere preface, intended to prepare you for a piece of news which will surprise you. I am a ruined man." She looked at him with amazement, not seeming to understand him. "I said—ruined," he added with a nervous laugh, "as ruined as man can be."

"Oh, you are making fun of me, joking—"

"I never spoke so seriously in my life. It seems strange to you, no doubt, and yet it's sober truth." Jenny's big eyes continued to question him. "Don't you know," continued he, with lofty carelessness, "that life is like a bunch of grapes, which one may eat gradually, grape by grape, or else squeeze into a glass and toss off all the juice at a gulp. I chose the latter system. My bunch of grapes was worth four million francs; and I've drunk up the last dregs of the juice. I don't regret having done so, for I've had a jolly life for my money. But now I can flatter myself that I am as great a beggar as any beggar in France. Everything at my house is in my creditor's hands—I have neither a home nor means." He spoke with increasing animation, and although many a strange thought crossed his mind, he was not playing a part, but speaking in all good faith.

"But—then—" stammered Jenny.

"What?" asked he. "Do you want to know if you are free? Of course you are." She hardly knew whether to rejoice or mourn. "Yes," he resumed, "I give you back your liberty." And as she made a gesture he misunderstood, he added quickly, "Oh! don't distress yourself, you won't be left in a state of need. Remember that the furniture here is yours, and that I have provided for you besides. I have also got five hundred napoleons in my pocket, which is all I have; I have brought them to give them to you." With another laugh he passed her the money on a plate, just as a waiter might have done; but she pushed back the proffered gift with a shudder. "Oh, well," said he, "that's a good sign, my dear; very pretty indeed! I've always thought and said that you were a good girl—in fact, too good; you need correcting."

She had, indeed, a good heart; for instead of taking Hector's bank notes and turning him out of doors, she tried to comfort and console him. Since he had confessed to her that he was penniless, she ceased to hate him, and even began to care for him. Hector, without a home, was no longer the dreaded master by right of wealth, the millionaire whose passing fancy had raised her from the gutter. He was no longer the execrated tyrant of heretofore. Ruined, he descended from his obnoxious pedestal, and became a simple mortal, worthy of preference, however, on account of his good looks and gallantry. And, besides, Jenny mistook this last artifice of his foolish vanity for the generous impulse of his heart, and was deeply touched by the proffered farewell gift. "You are not as poor as you say," said she, "as you still have so considerable a sum."

"But, my dear child, I have several times given as much for a set of diamonds you envied."

She reflected for a moment, and then as if some sudden idea had occurred to her, she exclaimed, "That's true enough ; but I can spend a great deal less, and yet be just as happy. Formerly, before I knew you, when I was young—the poor creature was even now but nineteen years of age—ten thousand francs seemed to me one of those fabulous sums which people talk about, but which few ever saw in one pile, and fewer still ever held in their hands." So saying she tried to slip the money into the count's pocket ; but he prevented her doing so. "Come, take it back, keep it," she said.

"What shall I do with it?"

"I don't know, but couldn't this money bring in more? Couldn't you speculate on the Bourse, bet at the races, play at Baden, or something? I've heard of people who are now rich as kings, who commenced with nothing, and hadn't your talents either. Why don't you do as they did?" She spoke excitedly, like a woman anxious to persuade, while he looked at her, astonished to find her so sensitive and disinterested. "You will, won't you?" she insisted, "now, won't you?"

"You are a good girl," said he, for one moment positively touched, "but you must really take this money. I give it to you, and don't be worried about me."

"But have you any left? How much have you besides?"

He searched his pockets, and counted the money remaining in his purse. "Here are three hundred and forty francs," he answered, "more than I need. I must give gratuities to your servants before I go."

"And what in Heaven's name will become of you?"

He leant back in his chair, negligently stroked his beard, and replied, "I am going to blow my brains out." Jenny uttered an exclamation of surprise, which to Hector's mind implied that she doubted him. He took his pistols from his pocket, showed them to her, and continued: "You see these toys? Well, when I leave you, I shall go somewhere or other—no matter where—put the muzzle of one of them to my temple, press the trigger—and all will be over!"

She gazed at him, breathing hard and fast, with a pale face and dilated eyes. But her terror was blended with admiration. She marvelled at his calm courage and careless tone of raillery. What superb disdain of life! To exhaust his fortune and then kill himself, without a plaint, a tear, or regret—to her mind this seemed unexampled heroism. She loved him as she had never loved before. "No!" she cried, "No! It shall not be!" And suddenly rising to her feet, she seized him by the arm. "You will not kill yourself. Promise me you won't, swear it to me. It isn't possible you could do so! I love you now, although I couldn't bear you before. Ah! I did not know you then, but now—come, we will be happy. You have played with millions, but you don't know how much ten thousand francs are—but I know. With such a sum we can live a long time, and very well, too. And then if we sell the useless things—my horses, carriages, diamonds, and cashmeres, we can realise seven or eight times as much. We can have a hundred thousand francs at our disposal—quite a fortune! Think how many happy days—"

But the Count de Trémoré shook his head, with a smile. He was positively delighted; his vanity was intensely flattered by the fervent passion which beamed in the poor girl's eyes. How fondly he was loved! How deeply he would be regretted! What a hero the world was about to lose!

"We won't stay here," continued Jenny, with impetuosity, "we will go and live outside Paris. Why, beyond Belleville one can rent a house with

a large garden for less than a thousand francs a year. And there we might be happy. But you must never leave me, for I should be jealous—dreadfully jealous! We need have no servants. I'll show you I know how to keep house by myself." And as Hector made no remark, she added, "While the money lasts, we'll laugh away the days, and when it is all gone, if you are still of the same mind, you may kill yourself—that is, we will kill ourselves together. But not with pistols—No! We'll light a pan of charcoal, fall asleep in one another's arms, and that will be the end. People say that one may die in that manner without suffering."

This last remark roused Hector from his torpor. His vanity was offended, for only three or four days previously he had chanced to read in a newspaper an account of a cook's suicide, in which the culinary artist was described as having bravely suffocated himself with the fumes of charcoal in his garret. He had done so in a fit of love and despair, and before dying he had written a most touching letter to his faithless sweetheart. Now a nobleman could not possibly kill himself like a cook. The newspapers would certainly compare the two cases, and the memory of the last Count de Trémoré, whose family dated from the Crusades, would be overwhelmed with ridicule. Ridicule was one of those things which Hector most feared. How undignified it would be for him to suffocate himself, at Belleville, in the arms of a grisette. At the thought he roughly pushed Jenny away. "Enough of that," he said, in a careless tone. "What you say, my child, is all very pretty, but utterly absurd. A man of my name dies, he doesn't choke." And again taking the bank notes from his pocket, into which Jenny had slipped them, he threw them on the table. "Now, good-bye."

He would have gone at once if Jenny had not stepped before the door. "You shall not go!" she cried, "I won't let you do so; you are mine—for I love you; if you take one step, I'll scream."

The count shrugged his shoulders. "Come, there must be an end of it," he said.

"You sha'n't go!"

"Well, then, I'll blow my brains out here." And applying one of his pistols to his forehead, he added, "If you call out and don't let me pass, I shall fire." He spoke the threat in earnest.

But Jenny did not scream; her strength failed her; she uttered a deep groan and fainted.

"At last!" muttered Hector, replacing the pistol in his pocket. And without stopping to raise her from the floor where she had fallen, he left the room and shut the door. Then hastily summoning the servants he gave them ten napoleons to divide among themselves, and hastened away.

XIII.

ON reaching the street Count Hector walked up the boulevard, but all of a sudden he recollected his friends. The seizure of his property must already be known, and if he followed the boulevard he would certainly meet some choice companions whose condolence he was anxious to avoid. He could imagine the doleful faces they would assume to mask the secret satisfaction lurking in their hearts. He had wounded so many so called friends in their especial vanity that he must expect they would retaliate by some terrible revenge. When a man once insolently prosperous meets with his downfall,

his rivals are bound to rejoice. As these ideas occurred to him, he turned down the Rue Duphot, and walked towards the quays. Where was he going? He did not know, and did not even ask himself. He walked along at random, enjoying the physical pleasure which follows a good meal, and to all appearances happy to find himself still in the land of the living on this mild, sunshiny April day. The weather was superb, and all Paris was out of doors. There was a holiday aspect about the city. The flower vendors at the corners of the bridges had their baskets full of violets. The count bought some near the Pont Neuf, arranged them in his button-hole, and without waiting for his change passed on. At last he reached the open space at the end of the Boulevard Bourdon, where jugglers and mountebanks delight to congregate, and here the jarring music of the hurdy-gurdies, and the noisy calls of the strollers, roused him from his torpor, and brought his thoughts back to the situation. "I must leave Paris," he muttered, turning towards the Orleans railway station, where he asked the first porter he met at what time a train left for Etampes. Why did he choose Etampes? One cannot say. However, a train had just gone, and the next would only leave in two hours' time. He was much annoyed at this, and as he was too nervous to wait at the station, he determined to kill time by strolling through the Jardin des Plantes.

He had not been there for ten or twelve years—indeed not since he was a schoolboy, when on half-holidays he and his companions were conducted there to look at the animals. Nothing had changed, however. After walking about for some time, carelessly glancing at the beasts and birds, he turned into the main avenue, which was nearly deserted. At the further end he sat himself down on a bench opposite the mineralogical museum and reflected on his position. He recalled the departed years, and could not remember among the many days that had elapsed a single one that had left him a truly faultless souvenir. Millions had slipped between his prodigal fingers, and yet he could not recollect a single useful expenditure, a really generous gift of twenty francs. Folly or vanity had always prompted his actions. He, who had had so many friends, racked his memory in vain for one whom he really regretted to part from. And as he gazed into the mirror of the past, he realised how inane had been the pleasure which had formed the aim of his existence. He had not lived for himself but for others. "Ah, what a fool I was!" he muttered—"what a fool!" And yet after living for others, he was going to kill himself for others as well. His heart softened. Who would think of him eight days hence? Not one living being. Yes—Jenny, perhaps. Yet no. In less than a week she would no doubt be consoling herself with some new lover. The bell which announces the closing of the gardens rang. Evening had come, and a thick damp mist hung over the banks of the Seine. The count felt the chill and left his seat. "To the station again," muttered he.

It was a horrible idea to him now—this project of shooting himself in the shade and silence of some distant forest. He pictured himself lying bleeding and disfigured in some ditch or ravine. Passing vagrants would no doubt rob his jewellery, and then the gendarmes would come by, find his body, and take it to the nearest town to be identified. He would lie perhaps on a slab in some provincial Morgue. "Never!" cried he, at this thought, "no, never!"

How should he die, then? He reflected, and at last determined to go to some second-class hotel on the left bank of the Seine, and kill himself there. He accordingly turned his steps towards the Quartier Latin. The careless

air which he had forced his features to assume that morning, had now given way to a look of sad resignation. He was suffering; his head ached, and he felt cold. "If I shouldn't die to-night," he thought, "I shall have a terrible attack of influenza in the morning." This mental sally did not make him smile, but rather induced him to regain his original firmness. On reaching the Rue Dauphine he looked about for a hotel, but it suddenly occurred to him that, as it was not yet seven o'clock, he might arouse suspicion by asking for a room at that early hour. Remembering that he had still more than a hundred francs in his pocket, he resolved to dine. The dinner should be his last meal. He went into the best restaurant he could find, but although he drank three bottles of wine at his repast, he could not change the current of his thoughts, nor rouse himself from his anxious sadness. To the surprise of the waiters he scarcely touched the dishes set before him, and grew more and more gloomy after each potation. His dinner cost him ninety francs; he threw his last hundred franc note on the table and went out. As it was not yet late, he entered a students' café near by, and sat down at a table in the further corner of the room. He ordered some coffee and rapidly drank three or four cupfuls. He wished to excite himself, to screw up his courage, so that he might not shrink from his determination; but drink only seemed to make him more and more irresolute. A waiter, seeing him alone at the table, at last offered him a newspaper. He accepted it mechanically, and at the second glance read as follows:—"At the moment of going to press, we learn that a well-known nobleman has disappeared, after announcing his intention to commit suicide. The statements made to us are so strange that we defer particulars until to-morrow, when we hope to have authentic information." These lines startled Hector. They were his death-warrant—his unalterable sentence, signed by the tyrant whose obsequious courtier he had always been—public opinion. "They will never cease talking about me," he muttered angrily; and then with sudden determination he added, "Come, I must make an end of it."

He soon reached a respectable hotel, entered, and on the strength of his appearance was speedily conducted to the best room in the house. He ordered a fire to be lighted, and asked for sugar, water, and writing materials. At this moment he was as firm as in the morning. "I must not hesitate," he muttered, "nor recoil from my fate." He sat down at the table near the fireplace, and penned a declaration which he intended for the police. "No one must be accused of my death," he commenced; and he went on by asking that the hotel-keeper should be indemnified. When he had finished it was nearly eleven o'clock. He laid his pistols on the mantelshelf, remarking: "I will shoot myself at midnight. I have yet an hour to live."

Then throwing himself into an arm-chair he buried his face in his hands. Why did he not kill himself at once? Why prolong his life for another hour in probable anguish and torture? He could not have told. He was diving again into his past life, reflecting on the headlong rapidity of the occurrences which had brought him to that wretched room. How swiftly time had flown by! It seemed but yesterday that he first began to borrow. But the recollection of his folly was so bitter that he willingly allowed his thoughts to follow another direction. Jenny, no doubt had prompted that paragraph in the evening paper. She had recovered from her swoon and hastened after him. Not finding him on the boulevard, she had probably gone to his house, then to his club, and then to some of his

friends. So that to-night, at this very moment, the boulevardian world was discussing him. "Have you heard the news? Ah, yes, poor Trémoré! What a romance! A good fellow, only—" Picturing to himself the dialogue, he thought he heard that "only" greeted with laughter and innuendoes.

But time was passing on. Half-past eleven had struck while he was yet reflecting, and now it was within a minute of midnight. The count rose to his feet, seized one of his pistols, and placed himself near the bed, so as not to fall on the floor. The first stroke of twelve resounded—and yet he did not fire. Hector was considered to be a man of courage. He had fought at least ten duels, and his cool bearing on the ground had always been admirably remarked. On one occasion he had killed his adversary, and that night he slept very soundly. And yet he did not fire now. But then there are two kinds of courage. One is a spurious form of bravery, meant for the public eye, and which, to be displayed, needs to be stimulated by personal passion, and the applause of lookers-on. The other, true courage, despises public opinion, and obeys conscience alone. It was two minutes after midnight, and Hector still held the pistol against his forehead. "Am I going to be afraid?" he asked himself. In fact he was afraid, but would not confess it. He laid his pistol on the table, and returned to his seat near the fire. His legs and arms were trembling. "It's nervousness," he muttered. "It'll pass off."

Deciding to wait till one o'clock, he tried to convince himself of the necessity of committing suicide. If he did not do so, what would become of him? How could he live? Could he make up his mind to work? Besides, could he appear in public, when all Paris knew what had been his intentions that morning. This thought goaded him to fury, and with sudden courage, he grasped his pistols. But the mere touch of the cold steel caused him to drop his arm and draw back shuddering. "I cannot," he repeated, in anguish. "I cannot!"

The idea of the physical pain which would attend his shooting himself caused him positive dread. Why had he not planned a gentler death? Poison, or perhaps charcoal—like the cook? He did not think of the ridicule now; all that he feared was, that the courage to kill himself would fail him. He went on reprieving himself from half-hour to half-hour. It was a night of agony. He wept with grief and rage, wrung his hands, and even prayed. Towards daylight he became exhausted, and fell into an uneasy slumber in his arm-chair. He was roused at last by some one rapping at the door. It was a waiter, who had come to take his order for breakfast, and who started back with amazement as he viewed Hector's livid features and disordered attire. "I want nothing," said the count. "I'm going down."

He had just enough money left to pay his bill, and six sous for the waiter. He walked away without end or aim in view. He was more resolved than ever to die, but yearned for some days' respite to nerve himself for the deed. But how could he live during the interval? He had not a single centime left. At last an idea struck him—the pawnshop!

He knew that a certain amount of money would be advanced to him on his jewellery, by applying to the *Mont de Piété**; and at last, after walking about for some time, he found one of the branch offices in the Rue de

* The public pawnbroker establishment of Paris, which has branch bureaux through the city.

Condé. The dark, damp waiting-room was full of people, but despite the gloomy aspect of the place, the assembled borrowers were by no means downcast. Many of them were students, who talked gaily together while waiting for their turns. The Count de Trémoré advanced, carrying his watch and chain, together with a brilliant diamond which he had drawn from his finger. He was considerably abashed, and did not know how to open his business. A young woman standing by at last pitied his embarrassment. "See," said she, "put your things on the counter there in front of the window with green curtains."

A moment later a voice, which seemingly came from the next room, exclaimed: "Twelve hundred francs for the watch and ring."

The mention of so large an amount created quite a sensation. All the bystanders paused in their conversation, and gazed enviously at the millionaire who was going to pocket such a fortune. The millionaire, however, made no reply. The same woman who had spoken to him before now nudged his arm. "That's for you," said she. "Answer whether you will take it or not."

"I'll take it," cried Hector. His delight was so great that he already forgot his agony of the previous night. Twelve hundred francs! There were yet long days before him. Had he not heard there were clerks who hardly earned as much in a year? After he had waited some time, a clerk, who was writing at a desk, called out, "Who are the twelve hundred francs for?"

The count stepped forward. "For me," said he.

"Your name?"

Hector hesitated. He would never give his name aloud in such a place as this, so he mentioned the first that occurred to him: "Durand."

"Where are your papers?"

"What papers?"

"A passport, a receipt for rent, a shooting license to—"

"I haven't any."

"Go for them, or bring two well-known witnesses."

"But—"

"There is no but. The next—"

Hector was provoked by the clerk's abrupt manner. "Well, then," said he, "give me back my jewellery."

The clerk looked at him jeeringly. "Can't be done. No goods that are registered can be returned without proof of rightful possession." So saying, he went on with his work. "One French shawl, thirty-five francs—whose is it?"

Hector meanwhile walked out of the establishment. He had never suffered, or even imagined he could suffer, so much. He had had just one ray of hope, and this was now extinguished. The jewellery left at the Mont de Piété constituted his last resources. There could now be no romance about his suicide. His death would not now be voluntary; he could neither hesitate nor choose the fatal hour; he must kill himself at once, for he had not the means of living one day longer. And life had never before seemed so sweet to him. He had never felt so keenly the exuberance of youth and strength. He suddenly realised that he had never tasted many an enviable pleasure. Everything that could be bought had been his, but nothing that is given or achieved had been his lot. He already regretted not merely the ten thousand francs given to Jenny, but the two hundred divided among the servants—ay, even the six sous given to the

waiter at the restaurant, and the money he had spent on his bunch of violets. The flowers still hung in his buttonhole, faded and shrivelled. What good had they done him? While the sous expended on them! Ah! he did not think of his wasted millions now; his regret was for a few coppers flung uselessly away. True, he might, if he chose, still easily find some little money. He had only to return quietly home, and resume possession of such of his property as had not been seized. But then he would have to confront the world, and confess that terror of death had overcome him at the last moment. The sneering glances of his friends would pierce him far more cruelly than any bullet. No, the world should not be deceived; when a man announces that he is going to kill himself—he must do so. Thus Hector was going to die simply because he had said he would, and because the newspapers had announced his intention of doing so. As he walked along, he confessed to himself that these were the only motives that prompted him to persevere in his design, and he bitterly reproached himself for his folly.

Remembering a pretty spot in the wood of Viroflay, where he had once fought a duel, he resolved to shoot himself there. The weather was fine, and on his way he met many a young couple strolling into the country on a lover's walk. Workmen were drinking and clinking their glasses under the trees along the river bank; and on all sides appeared signs of happiness and contentment, cruelly contrasting with Hector's wretchedness. On reaching the Sevres bridge, he descended the river embankment, and kneeling down beside the stream, scooped some water into the palm of his hand and drank it with avidity. He had not even a penny to buy a glass of wine. A strange feeling of lassitude crept over him, and he soon sunk on the grass hard by. Death now seemed a refuge from misery, and he could almost welcome the prospect with joy. Close at hand stood a riverside restaurant, from the windows of which he could be plainly seen, as well as from the neighbouring bridge; but in his present despair he was quite careless of observation, and muttered to himself: "As well here as elsewhere."

He had just drawn a pistol from his pocket, when he heard some one calling him by name: "Hector! Hector!" He sprang to his feet again, concealed his weapon, and looked about him. A man was hastening down the embankment and approaching him with outstretched arms. The new comer was of the count's own age, well built, though rather stout, and with a good-natured, open face, lit up with frank black eyes—the kind of man who inspires sympathy at first sight, and with whom one becomes fast friends after a week's acquaintance. Hector recognized in him one of his oldest friends, a college mate. They had once been very intimate together, but had lost sight of each other for a couple of years or so. "Sauvresy!" exclaimed M. de Trémoré, well nigh stupefied.

"Yes," gasped the new comer, out of breath. "I've been watching you for the last two minutes; what were you doing here?"

"Why—nothing."

"Ah! what they told me at your house this morning was true, then! I went there."

"What did they say?"

"Nobody knew exactly what had become of you, but I learned you had told Jenny when you left her the afternoon before that you were going to blow your brains out. The papers have already announced your death, with details. It was on seeing their statements that I went to your place."

"You see, then," tragically answered Hector, who was greatly impressed by what Sauvresy told him, "that I must kill myself!"

"Why? Merely to save the papers from the trouble of correcting their mistake?"

"People will say that I shrunk—"

"Oh, 'pon my word now! According to you, a man must make a fool of himself because it has been reported that he was going to do so. That's absurd, old fellow. What do you want to kill yourself for?"

Hector reflected; he almost realized a possibility of living. "I am ruined!" answered he, sadly.

"And it's for that? Why, my friend, let me tell you, you are a fool! Ruined! Of course it's a misadventure, but a man of your age rebuilds his fortune. Besides, you are not quite so ruined as you say, for I have an income of a hundred thousand francs."

"A hundred thousand francs—"

"Well, my fortune is in land, which brings me about four per cent."

Trémoré knew that his friend was well off, but not that he was so wealthy as this. He answered with a tinge of envy in his tone: "Well, I had more than that once; but I ate no breakfast this morning."

"And you did not tell me so at once! But true, you are in a pitiable state; come along quick." And so saying, Sauvresy led the count towards the restaurant hard by.

Trémoré was conscious of having been surprised in a distressingly ridiculous situation. If a man who has determined to blow his brains out is accosted or surprised, he hastily presses the trigger and doesn't conceal his pistol. Sauvresy was the only one among all the count's acquaintances who had sufficient sterling friendship for him not to torture him with raillery, or to point out the ludicrous character of his position. Thus, Hector did not long remain abashed, and when he found himself seated at table he experienced all the joy which follows rescue from terrible peril. He was himself again, young and strong once more. He told Sauvresy everything; his vain boasting, his terror at the last moment, his night of agony at the hotel, and his disappointment at the Mont de Piété. "Ah!" said he. "You have saved me! You are a friend indeed—my only friend, my brother."

They conversed together during more than two hours. "Come," said Sauvresy at last, "let us arrange our plans. You wish to disappear for a time; I see that. But to-night you must write four lines to the papers, and to-morrow I will take your affairs in hand—that's a thing I know how to do. Of course I've no notion how you stand; but I will agree to save something from the wreck. We've got money, you see; your creditors will be easy with us."

"But where shall I go?" asked Hector, whom the mere idea of isolation terrified.

"What? Why, you'll come home with me to Valfeuilu, of course. Don't you know that I am married? Ah, my friend, there isn't a happier man than myself in existence. I married—for love—the loveliest and best of women. You will be a brother to us. But come, my carriage is near by. Let us take it."

XIV.

M. PLANTAT paused ; his companions had neither interrupted him by word nor gesture. M. Lecoq reflected while listening ; asking himself where M. Plantat could have obtained all this minute information. Who had written Trémorrel's singular biography ? As he glanced at the papers from which Papa Plantat read, he perceived that they were not all in the same handwriting.

Bertha Lechaillu, said the old Magistrate, resuming his story, had become Madame Sauvresy by an unhopèd-for piece of good fortune. Contrary to her husband's belief, she did not love him. She was the daughter of a poor country schoolmaster, whose highest ambition was to become an assistant teacher in a Versailles school ; and yet *she* was not even satisfied by a marriage which made her, so to say, the absolute mistress of one of the finest estates in this part of France. Although surrounded by every luxury, with money to satisfy every whim as well as every want, respected by her inferiors, flattered and cultivated by her equals, still she was not content. She found her life insipid, precisely because it was so well regulated, so smooth, so free from annoyance and trouble. She yearned for more exciting pleasures than hunting, riding, and driving, giving dinners and balls, receiving guests and going to social entertainments. She longed for some unknown emotions and sensations, something unforeseen, with a dash of passion and adventure. The first day she saw Sauvresy she disliked him, and her aversion, although kept secret, increased as her influence over him increased. She thought him common, vulgar, and ridiculous. She interpreted the simplicity of his manners as silliness. She could perceive nothing to admire in him. She did not listen to him when he spoke, having already decided in her wisdom that he could say nothing that was not either tedious or commonplace. She would have given anything for him to have been some wild, young rake, the terror of his family and society. And yet prior to his marriage, Sauvresy had done as many other young men do. He had gone to Paris and tried the life which his friend Trémorrel led ; but he had enough of it in six months, and hastily returned to Valfeuillu to rest after such fatiguing pleasures. His experience had cost him a hundred thousand francs, but he declared he did not regret purchasing it at such a price.

Bertha was wearied with her husband's constancy and worship. She had only to express a desire to be at once obeyed, and this blind submission to all her wishes appeared to her servile in a man. A man is born, she thought, to command and not to obey ; to be the master and not the slave. She would have preferred a husband who came home in the middle of the night, still heated from his orgie, having lost at play, perhaps, and who would have struck her had she upbraided him. A tyrant, but a man. Some months after her marriage she suddenly took it into her head to indulge in various absurd freaks and extravagant caprices. She wished to try him, and see how far his constant complacency would go. She thought she would tire him out. It was intolerable to feel so absolutely sure of her husband, and to have nothing to fear, not even the caprice of an hour ; for as she was aware she so filled his heart that he had no room for any other. Perhaps there was yet more than this in Bertha's aversion. She knew herself, and inwardly confessed that had Sauvresy wished it she would have been his without becoming his wife. She was so lonely at her

father's, so wretched in her poverty, that she would have willingly fled from home as his mistress. And she despised her husband because he had not despised her enough! People were always telling her that she was the happiest of women. Happy! Why, there were days when she wept at the thought that she was married. Happy! There were times when she positively longed to fly, to seek adventure and forbidden pleasure—such indeed was the unhealthy condition of her mind. The fear of poverty which she dreaded alone restrained her. This fear was partly caused by a wise precaution taken by her father who had recently died. At the epoch of her marriage Sauvresy wished to settle 500,000 francs on her, but worthy old Lechaillu opposed this generous offer. "My daughter," he said, "brings you nothing. Settle forty thousand francs on her if you like, but not a sou more; otherwise there shall be no marriage." And when Sauvresy insisted, the old man added: "I hope she will be a good and worthy wife: if so, your fortune will be hers. But if she is not, forty thousand francs will be none too little for her. Of course, if you are afraid of dying first, you can make a will."

Sauvresy was forced to yield. Perhaps the worthy schoolmaster knew his daughter; if so he was the only one who did; for never was perversity and depravity so skilfully concealed under the mask of hypocrisy. Although at the bottom of her heart, she thought herself the most wretched of women, she kept her ideas on the subject altogether secret. She knew how to show her husband, in lieu of the genuine love she did not feel that semblance of attachment which men only too often mistake for the real thing. Their friends would say, "Bertha is foolishly fond of her husband." And Sauvresy, convinced that this was the truth, would joyfully exclaim, "Yes, my wife adores me."

Such, then, was the state of affairs at Valfeuilu, at the epoch when Sauvresy found Trémoré on the banks of the Seine with a pistol in his hand. Sauvresy missed his dinner that evening for the first time since his marriage, though he had promised to be punctual, and the meal was kept waiting for him. Bertha might have been anxious about his absence, but she was only indignant at what she considered his impoliteness. She was asking herself how she should punish her husband, when, at ten o'clock at night, the drawing-room door abruptly opened, and Sauvresy appeared smiling on the threshold. "Bertha," said he, "I've brought you a ghost." She scarcely deigned to raise her head. "A ghost, you know," continued Sauvresy, "whom I've often spoken to you about, and whom you'll like because I love him, and because he's my oldest comrade and best friend." And standing aside, he gently motioned Hector into the room. "Madame Sauvresy, allow me to present to you the Count Hector de Trémoré."

Bertha abruptly rose to her feet, blushing and confused, agitated by an indefinite emotion, as if she really beheld an apparition. For the first time in her life she was abashed, and did not dare to raise her clear blue eyes. "Monsieur," she stammered, "you are welcome."

Trémoré's name was familiar to her. Sauvresy had often mentioned it, and she had frequently seen it in the papers, and had heard it mentioned in the drawing-rooms of her friends. From what she had heard, she had pictured the count as a very fascinating personage indeed. He was, according to his reputation, a hero of another age, a modern Don Juan and Don Quixote blended in one, a terribly fast man of the world, one of those whose lives astonish common people, whom peaceful citizens consider out-laws, whose extravagant passions overleap the narrow bounds of social pre-

judice, who tyrannize over others, whom all fear, who fight on the slightest provocation, who scatter gold with a prodigal hand, and whose iron health is proof against the greatest excesses. She had often in her miserable reveries tried to imagine what kind of man this Count de Trémoré was. She had decked him with all the qualities she desired for her fancied hero, with whom she might fly from her husband in search of new adventures. And now, all of a sudden, he appeared before her.

In compliance with a suggestion from Sauvresy, she held out her hand, which Trémoré took with a bow; slight as was his pressure, it seemed to give her an electric shock.

Sauvresy threw himself into an arm-chair. "You see, Bertha," said he, "our friend Hector is exhausted with the life he has been leading. He has been advised to take rest, and has come to stay here for a while with us."

"But, dear," answered Bertha, "are you not afraid the count will be rather bored here?"

"Why?"

"Valfeuillu is very quiet, and we are but dull country folks." Bertha talked for the sake of talking, so as to break the silence which embarrassed her, to induce Trémoré to speak, and hear his voice. As she talked she observed him, and studied the impression she made on him. Her radiant beauty usually struck those who saw her for the first time with open admiration. But the count remained impassible. She recognized in him the worn-out rake of title, the fast man who has tried, experienced, exhausted everything in life with consummate coolness and superb indifference. And because he did not admire her she admired him the more. "What a difference," thought she, "between him and that vulgar Sauvresy, who is surprised at everything, whose face expresses everything he thinks, and whose eyes betray what he is going to say before he opens his mouth." Bertha was mistaken. Hector was not as cold and indifferent as she imagined. He was simply wearied—in fact, utterly exhausted. He could scarcely sit up after the terrible excitement of the last twenty-four hours. Indeed, he soon asked permission to retire.

On being left alone with his wife, Sauvresy told her what had happened, and why Trémoré had come to Valfeuillu; but, like a true friend, he omitted all particulars that might cast ridicule on his old college chum. "He's a big child," said he, at last, "a foolish fellow, whose brain is weak; but we'll take care of him and cure him."

Bertha never listened to her husband so attentively before. She seemed to agree with him, but she really admired Trémoré. Like Jenny, she was struck with the heroism of a man which could squander a fortune and then commit suicide. "Ah!" sighed she, "Sauvresy would never have done it!"

No, Sauvresy was a very different man to the Count de Trémoré. On the following morning he again expressed his intention to adjust his friend's affairs. Hector had slept well, having spent the night on an excellent bed, undisturbed by pressing anxieties; and he reappeared sleek and well dressed, the disorder and fatigue of the previous evening having quite disappeared. His was not a very impressible nature; in twenty-four hours he consoled himself for the worst catastrophes, and soon forgot the severest lessons of life. If Sauvresy had bid him be off, he would not have known where to go; and yet he had already resumed the haughty carelessness of a millionaire, accustomed to bend men and circumstances to his will. He was remarkably complacent and indulged in light jokes, as if years had elapsed since that night at the hotel, and as if all his disasters had been

remedied. Bertha was amazed at this tranquillity after such great reverses, and interpreted this childish recklessness as force of character.

"Now," said Sauvresy, "as I've become your man of business, give me some instructions and hints. What is, or rather what was the figure of your fortune?"

"I haven't the least idea."

Sauvresy had provided himself with a pencil and a sheet of paper, ready to set down the figures. He seemed a little surprised. "Very well," said he, "then we'll put x down as the unknown amount of the assets; now for the liabilities."

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied Hector with a superbly disdainful gesture.

"What, can't you give a rough guess?"

"Oh, perhaps. For instance, I owe between five and six hundred thousand francs to Clair & Co., five hundred thousand to Dervoy; about as much to Dubois of Orleans—"

"Well?"

"I can't remember any more."

"But you must have a memorandum of your loans somewhere?"

"No."

"You have at least preserved your bonds, bills, and the amounts of your various debts?"

"None of them. I burnt up all my papers yesterday."

Sauvresy sprang from his chair in astonishment; such a method of doing business seemed to him monstrous; he could not suppose that Hector was lying. And yet he was lying, and this affectation of ignorance was pure conceit. He considered it very noble and distingué to appear to have ruined one's self without knowing how!

"But, my dear fellow," cried Sauvresy, "how can we clear up your affairs?"

"Oh, don't clear them up at all; do as I do—let the creditors act as they please, they will know how to settle it all, you may be sure; let them sell my estates."

"Never! You *would* be ruined then, and no mistake!"

"Well, it's only a little more or a little less."

"What splendid disinterestedness!" thought Bertha; "what admirable contempt he shows for money, and those petty details which annoy common people! Sauvresy would never have been capable of acting like that?" She could not at least accuse her husband of avarice, for he had never refused her anything; in fact he had habitually anticipated her most extravagant fancies. Still, despite his large fortune, he had considerable respect for money, and was not indifferent to gain. When he had business with one of his farmers, he would rise at daybreak, mount his horse, and though it were mid-winter, ride several leagues in the snow for the sake of a hundred crowns. He would, no doubt, have ruined himself for his wife if she had willed it, and this, indeed, she was convinced of; but he would have done so in an orderly and gently progressing manner.

"You are right in one point," said Sauvresy to Hector after a moment's reflection, "your creditors ought to know your exact position. In fact they may be acting in concert. Their simultaneous refusal to lend you a hundred thousand francs makes me think so. At all events I will go and see them."

"Clair & Co., from whom I received my first loans, ought to be the best informed."

"Well, I will see Clair & Co. But look here, if you were reasonable, you would go to Paris with me, and between us—"

Hector turned very pale, and his eyes glittered. "Never!" he interrupted in a loud voice, "never!" His "dear friends" still terrified him. What! Reappear on the stage of his triumphs, now that he was ruined, that he had fallen and become ridiculous owing to the non-execution of his threat to commit suicide? Sauvresy had held out his arms to him. Sauvresy was a noble fellow, and loved him sufficiently not to consider him a coward because he shrank from self-inflicted death. But the others!—"Don't talk to me about Paris," he added in a calmer tone. "I shall never set my foot in it again."

"All right—so much the better; stay with us; I sha'n't complain, nor my wife either. Some fine day we'll find you a pretty heiress in the neighbourhood. But," added Sauvresy, consulting his watch, "I must go if I don't want to lose the train."

"I'll walk to the station with you," said Trémoré. This was not solely from a friendly impulse, for he wished to ask Sauvresy to look after the articles left at the Mont-de-Piété in the Rue de Condé, and also to call on Jenny.

As the two friends walked arm in arm along the road leading to Orcival, Bertha watched them from the window. "How different they are," she thought. "My husband said he wished to be his friend's steward; and to be sure he looks like one. But how nobly the count walks, what an easy, distinguished air! And yet I'm sure my husband despises him, simply because he has chosen to ruin himself by dissipation. Sauvresy positively affected an air of protection. But everything about the count betrays his superiority; even his name, Hector—how it sounds!" And after repeating "Hector," several times, as if it pleased her, she added contemptuously, "My husband's name is Clement!"

M. de Trémoré returned alone from the station with the gay air of a convalescent who has taken his first airing. As soon as Bertha saw him she left the window. She wished to remain alone to reflect upon his sudden introduction to her, analyze her sensations, listen to her presentiments, and decide, if possible, what line of conduct she should follow. She didn't show herself again until the evening, when Sauvresy returned to dinner hungry, thirsty, and tired, but with his face glowing with satisfaction, "Victory!" exclaimed he, as he ate his soup. "We'll snatch you from the hands of the Philistines yet. Parbleu! The finest feathers of your plumage will remain after all, and you will have enough for a good cosy nest."

Bertha glanced at her husband. "How is that," she asked.

"It's very simple. At the outset, I guessed the game of our friend's creditors. They reckoned on getting a sale of all his property, which they meant to buy in a lump, dirt cheap, as always happens, and then they would have resold it in detail, dividing the profits of the operation."

"And can you prevent that?" asked Trémoré, incredulously.

"Certainly. Ah, I've completely checkmated those gentlemen. I had the good luck to get them altogether late this afternoon. I said to them, you'll let us sell this property as we please, voluntarily, or else I'll outbid you all, and spoil your game. They looked at me in amazement, but my notary who was with me, remarked that I was M. Sauvresy, worth two millions. Then they opened their eyes and consented to grant my request."

Hector, despite what he had said, knew enough about his affairs to realize that this course would save him a fortune—a small one compared with what

he had possessed, but still very acceptable under the circumstances. The certainty of this delighted him, and moved for a moment by sincere gratitude, he grasped both Sauvresy's hands in his. "Ah, my friend," cried he, "you give me back my honour, after saving my life! How can I ever repay you?"

"By committing no imprudences or follies, except reasonable ones. Such as this," added Sauvresy, leaning towards Bertha and embracing her.

"And there is nothing more to fear?"

"Nothing! Why I could have borrowed the two millions in an hour, and they knew it. But that's not all. The search for you is suspended. I went to your house and took the responsibility of sending all your servants away except your valet and a groom. If you agree, we'll send the horses to be sold to-morrow, and they'll fetch a good price; your own saddle horse shall be brought here."

These details annoyed Bertha, who looked on her husband's conduct as servile in the extreme. "Really," thought she, "he was born to be a steward."

"Do you know what else I did?" continued Sauvresy. "I had three or four trunks filled with clothes, which I thought you would be wanting, sent them off by rail, and one of the servants has just gone to the Orcival station for them."

Hector in his turn now began to find that Sauvresy carried his services too far, treating him (Trémoré), indeed, as if he were a child who could forsee nothing. He was especially irritated that anyone should have even opined in a woman's presence that he was in want of clothes. He forgot that he had found it very simple and natural in the morning to ask his friend for some clean linen. However, just then a stir was heard in the hall: no doubt the trunks had come, and Bertha left the room to give such orders as were necessary. "Quick!" cried Sauvresy. "Now that we are alone, here are your trinkets. I had some trouble in getting them. They are suspicious at the Mont de Piété, and I think they began to suspect I was one of a band of thieves."

"You didn't mention my name, did you?"

"That would have been useless. However my notary was with me, fortunately. One never knows how useful one's notary may be. Don't you think society is unjust towards notaries?" Trémoré thought his friend talked very lightly about a serious matter, and this flippancy vexed him. However, he said nothing. "To finish up," added Sauvresy, "I paid Jenny a visit. She had been abed since last evening, and her maid told me she had not ceased sobbing ever since you left."

"Had she seen no one?"

"Nobody at all. She really thought you dead, and when I told her you were here with me, alive and well, I thought she would go mad with delight. Do you know, Hector, she's really pretty."

"Yes—not bad."

"And a very good little woman, too, I fancy. She told me some very touching things. I would wager, my friend, that she doesn't care so much for your money as she does for yourself." Hector smiled superciliously. "In short, she was anxious to follow me, so as to see you and speak with you. Before she would let me go, I had to swear she would see you to-morrow, not in Paris, as you said you would never go there, but at Corbeil."

"Ah, as for that—"

"She will be at the station to-morrow at twelve. We will go to Orcival

together, and while I take the train for Paris you can get into the one for Corbeil, and breakfast with Jenny at the Hotel de la Belle Image." Hector was about to offer an objection, when Sauvresy stopped him with a gesture. "Not a word," said he. "Here comes my wife."

XV.

ON going to bed, that night, the count was less enchanted than ever with his friend Sauvresy's devotion. Even the most perfect diamond will present a flaw when examined with a microscope. "Here he is," thought Hector "abusing of his position as having saved my life. Can't a man do you a service, without continually making you feel it? Because he prevented me from blowing my brains out it seems as though I had somehow become something belonging to him! A little more and he would have upbraided me about Jenny's extravagance. Where will he stop?"

The next day at breakfast he feigned indisposition so as not to eat, and suggested to Sauvresy that he would lose the train. As on the previous occasion Bertha stood at the window watching them as they walked away. During the last eight-and-forty hours she had been so troubled in mind that she hardly recognized herself. She scarcely dared to reflect. What mysterious power did this man possess, that thought of him should so affect her? She wished at one moment that he would leave—leave never to return, and then she owned to herself that in going he would carry away with him all her thoughts. She scarcely knew whether she ought to rejoice or grieve at the undefinable emotions which agitated her, though as natural with a woman of her spirit she was irritated at having to submit to an influence stronger than her own will. She decided to go down to the drawing-room that afternoon. He would join her there, at least out of mere politeness, and she fancied that when she had seen him nearer, talked with him and grown accustomed to him his influence over her would vanish. He would no doubt soon return, and so she watched for him, ready to go down stairs directly she saw him approaching. She waited in a feverish tremble, believing that this first *tête-à-tête* in her husband's absence would prove decisive. But time passed by; more than two hours had elapsed since he left with Sauvresy, and yet he did not re-appear. Where could he be?

At this moment, Hector was waiting for Jenny at the Corbeil station. The train steamed in and Jenny hastily alighted. Her emotion had not led her to neglect her toilet, for she had arrayed herself in a dark green *robe à traîne*, a velvet mantle, and the most coquettish little bonnet in the world. An exclamation of delight escaped her as soon as she perceived Hector, and pushing the other passengers aside, she rushed into his arms, laughing and crying at the same time. She spoke so loud, and made so many gestures that every one at once remarked her. "You didn't kill yourself, after all," said she. "Oh, how I have suffered; but how happy I am to-day!"

Trémorrel who was in a state of mingled delight and irritation—beingasperated by the cool curiosity of the bystanders, whose eyes were all fixed on him, did his best to calm and quiet her. Finding that he and Jenny were surrounded by a circle of inquisitive people, he drew her out of the station in hopes of escaping this prying curiosity; but his plan did not succeed, for they were persistently followed down into the town. Some

folks on the top of an omnibus going to a neighbouring locality begged the driver to walk his horses so as not to lose sight of this singular couple, and accordingly the nags did not get into a trot until Hector and Jenny had entered the hotel. Sauvresy's foresight in indicating a fit meeting-place was thus thwarted by Jenny's sensational arrival. The landlady was adroitly questioned, and it soon became known that the individual who waited for eccentric young women at the Corbeil railway station was an intimate friend of the owner of Valfeuilu. However, neither Hector nor Jenny were aware that they had become the great topic of conversation among the gossips of Corbeil. They lunched together in the best room at the Belle Image, and during the meal Trémoré concocted and related a highly sensational account of his restoration to life, depicting himself as having played a very heroic part well calculated to increase his mistress's admiration. Jenny in her turn then disclosed her plans for the future, and to do her justice they were most reasonable. Now that Hector was ruined she had resolved more than ever to remain faithful to him, intending moreover to give up her elegant rooms, sell her furniture, and follow some honest calling. She had found out one of her old friends, who had become an accomplished dress-maker, and who was anxious to find a partner with a little money, while she furnished her experience. They intended to open an establishment in the Quartier Bréda, and between them were bound to prosper. Jenny talked with a pretty, knowing, business-like air, which made Hector smile. These projects seemed very comical to him; and yet he was touched by this unselfishness on the part of a young and pretty woman, who was willing to give him her love and yet earn her living by her own work. Unfortunately, however, it was soon time to separate, Jenny had gone to Corbeil intending to stay there a week; and when the count told her this was absolutely impossible, she burst into tears. Next she flew into a pet, but finally she consoled herself with a plan to return on the following Tuesday. "Good-bye," said she, embracing him "think of me," and with a smile, she added, "I ought to be jealous; for they say your friend's wife is perhaps the handsomest woman in France. Is it true?"

"Upon my word I don't know. I've forgotten to look at her."

Hector told the truth. Despite his affected superciliousness he was still experiencing the effects of his recent emotions. A great moral crisis usually fomented mental dizziness and diverts attention from surrounding things. However, Jenny's expression, "the handsomest woman in France," attracted his notice, and he could, that very evening repair his forgetfulness. When he reached Valfeuilu, Sauvresy had not returned; Bertha was alone, reading, in the drawing-room, Hector seated himself near her, in such a position as to be able to observe her at his ease, while engaging her in conversation. His first impression was an unfavourable one. He found her beauty too sculptural in character, and on seeking for imperfections, and finding none, he was almost terrified by her lovely impassive face, and clear, cold eyes. Little by little, however, he accustomed himself to pass the greater part of the afternoon with Bertha, while Sauvresy was away arranging his affairs—selling property, cutting down interest, and discussing with agents and attorneys. He soon perceived that she listened to him with pleasure, from which he opined, in his vanity, that she was a decidedly superior woman, infinitely better than her husband. He had no wit, but possessed an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes and stories of adventure. He had seen so many things and known so many people that he was as interesting as a chronicle. He possessed a kind of frothy fervour, not

wanting in brilliancy, and a polite kind of cynicism which, at first, surprised one. Had Bertha been unimpassioned, she might have judged him at his true value : but she had lost all power of insight. She listened to him in a state of foolish ecstasy ; for to her he was as it were a traveller, who had returned from far and dangerous countries who had visited communities whose language she did not know, and whose manners and customs were wellnigh incomprehensible to her.

Days, weeks, and months passed by, and the Count de Trémoré did not find life at Valfeuilu so dull as he had feared. He allowed himself to glide down the gentle slope of material enjoyment, which in the long run leads to brutishness. Physical and moral torpor had followed his earlier fever, he ate and drank in copious fashion, and slept twelve round hours every night. In the day time, when he was not conversing with Bertha, he wandered about the park, lounged in a rocking-chair, or indulged in a mild canter in the saddle. At times he even went fishing under the willows at the end of the park ; and with ease and plenty soon grew fat. His favourite days, however, were those he spent with Jenny at Corbeil. She brought him all the gossip of the boulevards, thus reminding him of the past, and, besides, she usually found the means to have a little quarrel with him, which woke him up. She came regularly every week, and her love for Hector, far from falling off, seemed to increase with each fresh interview. Her affairs were in a very bad way. The business she had bought with her friend had been paid more than it was worth, and to make matters worse, at the end of the first month, her partner decamped with several thousand francs. As Jenny herself knew little or nothing about the trade, she was robbed without mercy on all sides. However, for the time being, she said nothing of these troubles to Hector, though she intended to ask him to come to her assistance eventually. It was the least that he could do. At first, the visitors to Valfeuilu were somewhat astonished at a young man of leisure's constant presence there ; but they soon grew accustomed to him. When guests arrived, Hector invariably assumed a melancholy expression of countenance, such as befitted a man who had undergone unheard-of misfortunes. He appeared inoffensive ; and folks remarked that his manners were charmingly simple. But at times, when he was alone, he would be seized with a sudden relapse of his old fever. "This life cannot last," thought he ; and he was overcome with childish rage on contrasting the past with the present. How could he shake off this dull existence, and get rid of the stiff homely people who surrounded him—Sauvresy's friends? Where should he take refuge? He was not tempted to return to Paris ; for what could he do there? His house had been sold to an old leather merchant ; and he had no money except what he borrowed from Sauvresy. Yet Sauvresy to Hector's mind was a most wearisome and bothering friend. He could not understand how any man could be so precise and painstaking, and, strange as it may seem, all his friend's efforts on his behalf only increased his dislike.

The settlement of Hector's affairs was most laborious. Creditors sprung up at every step, on every side, and it seemed as if the list of them would never finish. Several of them had been previously paid by the count, but their receipts could not be found, and they clamoured even louder than the others. Some, whose demands had been refused as exorbitant, threatened to go to law, hoping to frighten Sauvresy into paying. The latter wearied his friend by his incessant activity. Every two or three days he went to Paris, and he, moreover, attended the sales of the property in Burgundy

and near Orleans. The count at last cordially hated him ; he was annoyed by Sauvresy's happy, cheerful air, and grew supremely jealous. One thought—a wretched one—consoled him just a little. "Sauvresy is happy," said he to himself, "because he is blind. He thinks his wife is madly in love with him, whereas she can't bear him at all."

Bertha had, indeed, allowed Hector to perceive her aversion for her husband. She no longer studied the emotions of her heart ; she loved Trémorél, and confessed it to herself. In her eyes he realized the ideal of her dreams. But on the other hand, she was exasperated to find that he did not evince any love for her. He was gallant and courteous to her—but nothing more, so that her beauty was not so irresistible as she had been led to imagine. "If he loved me," thought she, "he would tell me so, for he certainly has no timidity with women." At last she began to hate the girl, her rival, whom, as she had learnt, Hector went to meet at Corbeil every week. She wished to see and know her. Who could she be ? Was she handsome ? Hector had been very reticent concerning Jenny, skilfully evading all questions, and perhaps not altogether sorry to let Bertha exercise her imagination anent his mysterious rendezvous. At last the time came when she could no longer resist the intensity of her curiosity. She dressed herself very simply, in black, concealing her features with a thick veil, and hastened to the Corbeil railway station at the hour when she thought she had most chance of seeing the girl in question. She seated herself on a bench in a corner of the waiting-room, near one of the windows, and after a short interval she perceived the count and a woman coming along the avenue hard by. They were arm in arm, and conversed in merry tones. They passed within a few steps of Bertha, and as they were walking slowly, she was able to scrutinize Jenny at her ease. She saw that she was pretty, but nothing more, whereupon in her inexperience she opined that the girl was not to be feared. Her object, then, being attained, she rose to go home. But she chose her time of departure awkwardly ; for as she was passing along behind some vehicles, Hector, who had just wished Jenny good-bye, came out of the station again. They crossed each other's paths at the gate, and, despite her veil, their eyes met. Did he recognize her ? His look certainly expressed great surprise, still he did not bow to her. However, Bertha, as she returned home by the river road, decided in her own mind that he must have recognized her ; and realising all the boldness of the step she had taken, she asked herself what would be the result of this fortuitous meeting ?

Hector, who was cautiously following her a little distance behind, had been greatly astonished on perceiving her. His watchful vanity had already acquainted him with what was transpiring in Bertha's heart, but, though modesty was no fault of his, he had never imagined that she was so enamoured of him as to take such a step as this. "She is plainly in love with me," he repeated to himself, as he went along. What should he do ? Should he leave Valfeuilu at once ? Should he still retain his old manner towards her, as if he had not seen her ? No, he ought to fly that very evening, without hesitation, without turning his head. These were his first thoughts. But they were quickly stifled by an explosion of fermenting passion. Ah, Sauvresy had saved him when he was dying ! Sauvresy had welcomed him, placed his heart, purse, and home at his disposal ; at this very moment he was making strenuous efforts to restore his fortunes. But men like Trémorél look on such services as outrages. Had not his sojourn at Valfeuilu been a period of constant suffering ? Was

not his self-conceit tortured from morn till night? Not a day without its humiliation. What! Must he openly acknowledge the superiority of a man whom in former years he had been wont to treat as an inferior. "Besides," thought he, judging his friend by himself, "he only acts in this fashion out of pride and ostentation. What am I at his house, but a living testimony of his generosity and devotion? He seems to live for me—it's Trémorél here and Trémorél there! He triumphs over my misfortunes, and converts his conduct into a title to public admiration." He could not forgive his friend for being so rich, so happy, so highly respected, for having known how to regulate his life, while he had exhausted his own fortune at thirty. Why should he not profit of this opportunity to avenge himself for the favours that overwhelmed him? "Have I run after his wife?" said he to himself, trying to quiet his conscience. "She comes to me of her own will, herself, without the least temptation on my part. I should be a fool if I repelled her."

Conceit has irresistible arguments. When Hector reached Valfeuilu, he had made up his mind. He did not fly. And yet he had neither the excuse of passion or temptation; he did not love this woman, and his infamy was deliberate, coldly premeditated. He and Bertha were riveted together by a tie far stronger than mutual attraction—their common hatred of Sauvresy. They owed too much to him. His hand had held both from degradation. During the first hours of their mutual understanding they indulged in slander, rather than in the cooings of love. They perceived too clearly the disgrace of their conduct, not to try to steel each other against remorse. They endeavoured to prove to their mutual satisfaction that Sauvresy was ridiculous and odious; as if their conduct were absolved by his deficiencies, if deficiencies he had. If indeed trustfulness is folly, Sauvresy was indeed a fool, for having perfect faith in his wife and his friend he could be deceived under his own eyes, in his own house. He suspected nothing, and every day he rejoiced that he had been able to induce Trémorél to live with him. He often repeated to his wife: "I am too happy."

Bertha employed every artifice to strengthen her husband's illusions. She who had previously been so capricious, nervous, and wilful, gradually became submissive to a degree of angelic softness. The prospects of her passion depended on her husband, and she spared no pains to prevent the slightest suspicion from disturbing his calm confidence. Such was her prudence and Hector's that no one in the house suspected what was going on. And yet Bertha was not happy. Her love did not yield her the rapture she had expected. She had hoped to be transported to the clouds, and she remained on earth, hampered by all the miserable ties of a life of mendacity and deceit. Perhaps she perceived that she was but the instrument of Hector's revenge on her husband, and that he only loved in her the dishonoured wife of an envied friend. To crown everything, she became jealous, and during long months tried to persuade Trémorél to abandon Jenny. But he always met her entreaties with the same reply, which, though it might be prudent, was irritating. "Jenny is our security—you must think of that."

In point of fact, however, he was trying to devise some means of getting rid of Jenny. It was a difficult task, for she clung more tenaciously than ever to his affection. He was often annoyed by her telling him that he had changed, and was no longer the same; and he grew impatient when he noted her sad looks and red eyes. One evening, in a fit of anger, she

threatened him in a very singular style. "You love another woman," she said. "I know it, for I have proofs of it. Take care! If ever you leave me, I shall revenge myself on her without mercy."

The count foolishly attached no importance to these words; indeed, they only hastened the separation. "Jenny is getting very troublesome," thought he. "If some day I failed to go and meet her when she was expecting me, she might come to Valfeuilu, and create a scandal." So, arming himself with all his courage, and rendered the more resolute by Bertha's tears and entreaties, he started for Corbeil one day determined to break off with Jenny. He took every precaution in acquainting her with his intentions, and gave the best reasons for his decision he could think of. "We must be careful, Jenny," said he, "and cease to meet for a while. I am ruined, you know, and the only thing that can save me is marriage."

Hector had prepared himself for an explosion of anger and grief, hysterics, and a swoon, but to his great surprise, Jenny did not answer a word. She turned as white as her collar, the colour left her ruddy lips, and she looked at him with a strange stare. "So you are going to get married?" she said, after a long pause.

"Alas, I must," he answered, with a hypocritical sigh. "As you know I have only been able to get money for you lately by borrowing from my friend; his purse will not be at my service for ever."

Jenny took Hector by the hand, led him to the window, and looking intently at him in hope that her gaze would penetrate into his mind, said slowly—"It is really true, then, that you leave me to get married?"

Hector disengaged one of his hands, and placed it on his heart. "I swear it on my honour," said he.

"I ought to believe you, then," replied Jenny, leaving the window, and turning to the mirror, she put on her bonnet, quietly tying the strings as if nothing had occurred. Then, when she was ready to go, she went up to Trémoré. "For the last time," said she, in a tone of affected firmness which her tearful, glistening eyes belied. "For the last time, Hector, are we really to part?"

"We must."

Jenny made a gesture which Trémoré did not see; her face assumed a malicious expression, and her lips parted with a sarcastic curve; however she recovered herself almost immediately. "I am going, Hector," said she, after a moment's reflection. "If you are really leaving me to get married, you shall never hear of me again."

"Why, Jenny, I hope I shall still remain your friend."

"Perhaps; only if you abandon me for another reason, remember what I tell you; you will be a dead man, and she a lost woman." She opened the door; he tried to take her hand; but she repelled him, and for the last time exclaiming, "Adieu!" hastily left the room.

Hector ran to the window to assure himself of her departure. She was walking swiftly along the avenue leading to the railway station. "Well, that's over," thought he, with a sigh of relief. "After all, she was a good girl."

XVI.

THE count told half the truth when he spoke to Jenny of his marriage. Sauvresy and he had discussed the subject, and if the matter was not so far advanced as he had represented, there was at least some prospect of such

an event occurring. Sauvresy had proposed a marriage in his desire to perfect Hector's restoration to fortune and society. One evening, a month or so before the incident just narrated, he had taken Hector into the library, saying: "Just listen to me for a quarter of an hour, and don't answer me hastily. What I am going to propose to you deserves serious reflection."

"Well, I can be serious when necessary."

"Let's begin with your debts. They are not completely paid, but one can now foresee the end. After everything is settled it is certain that you will have between three and four thousand francs left to you."

Hector had never, in his most sanguine mood hoped for such a result.

"Why, I shall be rich again," he exclaimed joyfully.

"No, not rich, but quite above want; and besides, there is a means of your regaining your lost position altogether."

"What means?"

Sauvresy paused for a moment, and looked steadily at his friend. "You must marry," said he at last.

The advice seemed to surprise Hector, but not disagreeably. "Marry?" said he, "It's easier to give that advice than to follow it."

"Excuse me—you ought to know that I don't speak rashly. What would you say to a young girl of good family, pretty, well brought up, so charming indeed, that, excepting my own wife, I know of no more attractive woman. Besides, she would have a dowry of a million francs. Come what would you say to such a match?"

"Ah, my friend, I should say that I adore her! And do you really know such an angel?"

"Yes, and you too, for the angel is Mademoiselle Laurence Courtois.

A look of discouragement came in to Hector's beaming eyes when he heard this name. "It's impossible," said he, "That pompous, practical old merchant, M. Courtois, would never give his daughter to a man who has been fool enough to waste his fortune."

Sauvresy shrugged his shoulders. "Now, I call that having eyes, and not seeing. You must know that Courtois, whom you think so practical, is really a most romantic man, and an ambitious old fellow to boot. He would consider it an excellent investment to give his daughter to Count Hector de Trémoré, cousin of the Duke of Samblemeuse, and a relative of the Commarins—and this even if you hadn't a sou. He would give anything to be able to talk of the count, his son-in-law, and the countess, his daughter. And remember you are not ruined, for you will have an income of twenty thousand francs, and perhaps more?"

Hector was silent. He had thought his life ended, and now, all of a sudden, splendid prospects were offered him. He might rid himself of his friend's patronizing protection; he would be free and rich, with a better wife, as he thought, than Bertha; while even his estate would outshine Sauvresy's. It moreover occurred to him that he might thus escape a mistress who although very loving and beautiful, was proud and bold, and whose domineering temper began to burden him. "I may say," he replied at last, in a serious tone, "that I have always thought M. Courtois an excellent and honourable man; while Mademoiselle Laurence seems to me so accomplished a young lady, that a man might be happy in marrying her even without a dowry."

"So much the better, my dear Hector, so much the better. But you know, the first thing is to win Laurence's affection; her father adores her, and, I am sure, would never give her to a man whom she had not chosen herself."

"Dont disturb yourself," answered Hector, in a tone of triumph, "she will love me soon enough?"

The next day he found occasion to meet M. Courtois, who invited him to dinner. The count did his utmost to fascinate Laurence, and his brilliant manners and delicate attentions were well fitted to surprise and dazzle a young girl. It was not long before Hector became the mayor's most assiduous guest. Nothing formal was said, nor any direct illusion made; but M. Courtois felt certain that Hector would some day ask him for his daughter's hand, and that neither he nor Laurence would say "no."

Bertha suspected nothing of all this. She was too much engrossed with Jenny to pay any attention to anything else. However, one night, after an evening spent with the count at the mayor's, and during which Hector had not once left the whist-table, Sauvresy decided to speak to his wife of the projected marriage, thinking the news would prove a pleasant surprise. On hearing his first words, she grew pale, and her emotion became so great that, fearful of betraying herself, she hastily retired to her boudoir. Sauvresy quietly sat himself down in one of the bedroom arm-chairs, and continued to expatiate on the advantages of such a marriage—raising his voice, so that Bertha might hear him in the adjoining room. "Do you know," said he, "that our friend will have a large income? We'll find an estate for him near by, and then we shall see him and his wife every day. They will be very pleasant society for us in the autumn. Hector is a fine fellow, and you've often told me how charming Laurence is." Bertha made no reply. This unexpected blow was so terrible that her brain whirled, and she found it impossible to think. "You don't say any thing," continued Sauvresy. "Don't you approve of the idea? I thought you'd be delighted with it."

She realized that if she were silent any longer, her husband would enter the boudoir, find her stretched in agony on the sofa, and guess everything. She made an effort and answered in a strangled voice: "Yes, yes; it's a capital idea."

"How queerly you say that! Do you see any objections?"

"I have some little fear for Laurence's future," said she at last.

"Bah! Why?"

"I only say what I've often heard you say. You told me that M. de Trémoré had been a libertine, a gambler, a prodigal—"

"All the more reason for trusting him. His past follies guarantee his future prudence. He has received a lesson which he will not soon forget. Besides, he will love his wife."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, he loves her already."

"Who told you so?"

"Himself." And Sauvresy began to describe Hector's passion, which he declared was becoming quite pastoral. "Would you believe it," said he, laughing, "he thinks our worthy friend Courtois a man of wit? Ah! lovers look through strange spectacles! He spends two or three hours every day at the mayor's house. What do you fancy he does there?"

Bertha, by a great effort, now succeeded in dissembling her grief, and re-entered the room with a smiling face. She began to undress herself with seeming calmness, but all the while she was suffering the bitterest anguish a woman can endure. To think she could not hasten to Hector, and ask him if it were true! For Sauvresy must be deceiving her. Why? She knew not. No matter. Her hatred of her husband developed into disgust; for she excused and pardoned her lover, and blamed her husband alone.

Who had initiated this idea of marriage? Her husband, of course! Who had roused Hector's hopes, and encouraged them? Her husband, always her husband. While he had remained harmless, she had been able to forgive him for having married her; she had compelled herself to endure him, and feign a love quite foreign to her heart. But now he became positively hateful; she would never submit to his interference in a matter which was life or death to her. She did not close her eyes all night; but passed the long hours of darkness in that feverish state of mind in which revenge is sought for and crime often conceived. It was only after breakfast the next morning that she at last found herself alone with Hector in the billiard-room. "Is it true?" she asked him.

Her expression of countenance was so threatening that he positively quailed. "True—what?" stammered he.

"Your marriage."

He was silent at first, asking himself whether he should tell the truth or equivocate. At last, irritated by Bertha's imperious tone, he answered, "Yes."

She was thunderstruck by this reply. Till then she had had a glimmer of hope. She thought he would at least try to re-assure her, and deceive her. There are times when a falsehood is the highest homage. But no—he acknowledged it. While she remained speechless, words quite failing her, Trémorel began to tell her the motives which had prompted his conduct. He could not live forever at Valfeuillu. What could he, with his habits and tastes, do with a few thousand francs a year? He was thirty; he must, now or never, think of the future. M. Courtois would give his daughter a million, and at his death there would be a great deal more. Should he let this chance slip? He cared little for Laurence, it was the dowry he wanted. He took no pains to conceal his meanness; but rather gloried in it, speaking of the marriage simply as a bargain, in which he gave his name and title in exchange for wealth.

Bertha at last stopped him with a look full of contempt. "Spare yourself," said she. "You love Laurence." And when he tried to protest that he really disliked Mlle. Courtois, she added: "Enough. Another woman would have reproached you; I simply tell you that this marriage shall not take place; I forbid it. Believe me, give the idea up frankly; don't compel me to act." With these words she retired, banging the door as she left.

"How she treats me!" said Hector, who was furious, to himself. "Just like a queen would treat a serf. Ah, she doesn't want me to marry Laurence. Well, we'll see!" However, on reflecting in a cooler mood, he asked himself if Bertha would carry out her threats should he insist on marrying. Plainly she would; for she was not the woman to shrink from the consequences of any act, however desperate. She would, no doubt, behave as she had threatened one day during one of their quarrels about Jenny, when she had remarked: "I will confess everything to Sauvresy, and we shall be more closely bound together by shame than by all the ceremonies of the church." This was certainly the method she would adopt to prevent this marriage which was so hateful to her; and Trémorel trembled at the idea of Sauvresy learning everything. "What would he do," thought he, "if Bertha told him? He would kill me off hand at least—that's what I should do in his place. If he didn't, I should have to fight a duel with him, and if I killed him, leave the country. Whatever happens, my marriage seems irrevocably broken off, and I shall have Bertha on my hands for all

time to come." He saw no possible way out of the horrible situation in which he had placed himself. All he could do was to wait.

And he waited, though not without going at times secretly to the mayor's, for he really loved Laurence. He waited on, in a state of growing anxiety, struggling against Sauvresy's urgent pressure and Bertha's frightful threats. How he detested this woman who held him, whose will weighed on him so heavily. Nothing could master her ferocious obstinacy. She had one fixed idea. He had hoped to conciliate her by dismissing Jenny, but in this he made a mistake, for when he said to her, "Bertha, I shall never see Jenny again." She answered ironically: "Mademoiselle Courtois will be very grateful to you!"

That evening, as Sauvresy was crossing the court-yard in front of his house, he noticed a beggar outside the gate, making signs to him. "What do you want, my good fellow?" he asked.

The beggar looked round him to see that no one was listening. "I have brought you a note," said he, in a low tone. "I was told to give it to no one but you, and to ask you to read it when you were alone." So saying, he mysteriously slipped a sealed envelope into Sauvresy's hand, adding with a wink, "It comes from a pretty girl."

Sauvresy turned his back to the house, tore the envelope open, and read: "SIR,—you will do a great favour to a poor unhappy girl, if you will come to-morrow to the Belle Image, at Corbeil, where you will be waited for all day by your humble servant, Jenny F——." Below ran this postscript: "Please don't say a word of this to the Count de Trémorcel." "Ah ha," thought Sauvresy, "there's some trouble about Hector, that's bad for the marriage."

"I was told there would be an answer, sir," said the beggar.

"Say I will come," replied Sauvresy, throwing him a franc.

XVII.

THE next day was cold and damp, and a thick fog hung over the low ground. However, directly breakfast was over, Sauvresy took a gun and whistled his dogs. "I'm going to have a turn in Mauprévoir wood," said he.

"A queer idea," remarked Hector, "for with this fog you won't see the end of your gun barrel in the woods."

"That doesn't matter, if I only see some pheasants."

However, shooting was only a pretext, for, on leaving Valfeuillu, Sauvresy took the direct road to Corbeil, and half-an-hour later, faithful to his promise, he entered the Belle Image hotel. Jenny was waiting for him in the room which had always been reserved for her since she had become a regular customer of the house. Her eyes were red with recent tears; she was very pale, and looked as if she had not slept. Her breakfast lay untouched on the table near the fireplace, where a bright fire was burning. When Sauvresy came in, she rose to meet him, and took him by the hand. "Thank you for coming," said she. "You are really very kind."

Sauvresy had but little regard for women of her class; but her grief seemed so sincere and deep, that he was touched. "You are suffering, Madame?" asked he.

"Oh, yes, very much." Her tears choked her, and she concealed her face in her handkerchief.

"I guessed right," thought Sauvresy. "Hector has deserted her. Now

I must try and heal the wound, and yet prevent any future meetings between them." He took Jenny's hand, and softly pulled away the handkerchief. "Have some courage," said he.

She raised her tearful eyes to him, and answered, "You know, then?"

"I know nothing, for, as you asked me in your note, I have not spoken to Trémoré; but I can imagine what the trouble is."

"He will not see me any more," murmured Jenny. "He has deserted me."

Sauvresy summoned up all his eloquence. The moment to be persuasive and paternal had come. He drew a chair near Jenny's, and sat down. "Come, my child," continued he, "you must be brave. People are not always young, you know. A time comes when the voice of reason must be listened to. Hector does not desert you, but he sees the necessity of assuring his future, and regulating his life on domestic ties; he feels the need of a home."

Jenny stopped crying. Resentment conquered grief. She rose, overturning her chair, and walked restlessly up and down the room. "Do you believe that?" said she. "Do you believe that Hector troubles himself about his future? I see you don't know his character. He dream of a home, or a family? He has never thought and never will think of any one but himself. If he had had any heart, would he have gone to live with you as he has done? He had a pair of arms to earn his bread and mine. I was ashamed to ask money of him, knowing that what he gave me came from you."

"But he is my friend, my dear child."

"Would you do as he has done?" Sauvresy did not know what to say; he was embarrassed by the rude logic of this daughter of the people, who judged her lover roughly, but justly at the same time. "Ah, I know him, I do," continued Jenny, growing more excited as her mind reverted to the past. "He once succeeded in deceiving me—the morning he came and told me he was going to kill himself. I was stupid enough to think him dead, and to cry about it. He, kill himself? Why, he's too much of a coward to hurt himself! Yes, I love him, but I don't esteem him. That's our fate you see, only to love the men we despise."

Jenny talked in a loud voice, and with many gesticulations, thumping the table with her fist every now and then, so that the bottles and glasses jingled. Sauvresy grew afraid lest the hotel people should hear her; they knew him, and had seen him come in. He felt sorry he had come, and tried to calm the girl. "But Hector is not deserting you," repeated he. "He will assure you a good position."

"Humph! I should laugh at such a thing! Have I need of *him*? As long as I have ten fingers and good eyes, I shall not be at any man's mercy. He made me change my name, and tried to accustom me to luxury! Well, now there's no Miss Jenny left, nor any riches either, but there's a Pelagie who means to earn her fifty sous a day without much trouble."

"No," said Sauvresy, "you won't need—"

"Need what? To work? But I like work; I am not a-doing nothing. I shall go back to my old life. I used to breakfast on a sou's worth of biscuit and a sou's worth of potatoes, and was well and happy. On Sundays I dined at a restaurant for thirty sous. I laughed more then in one afternoon, than during all the time I've known Trémoré." She no longer cried, nor was she angry; she was simply laughing—laughing at the thought of her old breakfasts, and her feasts at the restaurant. Sauvresy was stupe-

fied. He had no idea of this Parisian character with its dark and its light side, so full of transition, nervous and emotional to excess, now all smiles and laughter, now all tears and grief, giving a caress and a blow within the same minute, and whirled by a passing idea a hundred leagues or a thousand hours away from the present scene or time. "Yes," resumed Jenny, in a calmer tone, "I snap my fingers at Hector"—she forgot that she had just said exactly the contrary, "I don't care for him, but I won't let him leave me like that. It sha'n't be said that he left me for another woman. I won't have it."

Jenny was one of those women who do not reason, but feel; with whom it is folly to argue, for their fixed idea resists to the most peremptory logic. Sauvresy asked himself why she had sent for him, and opined that he would have great difficulty in sustaining the part he had intended to play. However he was patient. "I see, my child," he remarked, "that you haven't understood or even heard me. I told you that Hector intended to marry."

"He get married," answered Jenny with an ironical gesture, and after a moment's reflection, she added: "If it were true, though—"

"I tell you it is so."

"No," cried Jenny, "no, that can't be possible. He loves another woman I am sure of it, for I have proof of it." Sauvresy smiled; and this irritated her. "What was the meaning of that letter," she cried, "which I found in his pocket six months ago? It isn't signed to be sure, but it must have come from a woman."

"A letter?"

"Yes, a letter that destroys all doubt. You may wonder why I didn't speak to him about it? Ah, you see I didn't dare do so. I loved him. I was afraid of losing him if I said anything, and it were really true he loved another. And so I resigned myself to humiliation, I hid myself to weep—and hoped he would soon come back to me. Poor fool!"

"Well, but what do you mean to do now?"

"Me? I don't know—anything. I didn't say anything about the letter, but I kept it; it is my weapon and I shall use it. When I want to, I shall find out who she is, and then—"

"You will compel Trémoré, who is kindly disposed towards you, to use violence."

"He? What can he do to me? Why, I will follow him like his shadow—I will hawl out that woman's name everywhere. He might try to have me put in prison, but I will invent the most dreadful slander against him. They will not believe me at first, but later, part of it will be believed. I have nothing to fear—I have no parents, no friends, nobody on earth who cares for me. That's what it is to raise girls from the gutter. I have fallen so low that I defy him to push me lower. So, if you are his friend, sir, advise him to come back to me."

Sauvresy was really alarmed; he saw clearly how real and earnest were Jenny's threats. The law is powerless against certain persecutions. However, he hid his alarm under the blandest air he could assume. "Listen to me, my child," said he. "If I give you my word of honour to tell you the truth, you'll believe me, won't you?"

She hesitated a moment, and said, "Yes, you are honourable; I will believe you."

"Then, I swear to you that Trémoré hopes to marry a young girl who is immensely rich, and whose dowry will assure his future."

"He tells you so; he wants you to believe it."

"Why should he? Since he came to Valfeuillu, he can have had no other love affair than this with you. He lives in my house, as if he were my brother, between my wife and myself, and I could tell you how he spends his time every hour of every day as well as I could speak of myself."

Jenny opened her mouth to reply, but on sudden reflection remained silent. A flush spread over her face as she looked at Sauvresy with an indefinable expression of countenance. He did not notice this, but thinking of the proof which Jenny had spoken of, he was seized with some little curiosity to know what it was. "Now," said he, "suppose you showed me that letter."

At these words she quivered as if she had received an electric shock. "To *you*?" she said, shuddering. "Never!"

It often happens that while a man is sleeping a storm bursts and the thunder rolls without disturbing his slumber; but at other times the almost imperceptible flutter of a passing insect's wing suffices to awake him. Jenny's shudder was like such a fluttering to Sauvresy. It awoke the first doubt that had ever entered his mind since his marriage. Now his confidence, his happiness, his repose, were gone for ever. He rose with flashing eyes and trembling lips. "Give me the letter," said he, imperiously.

Jenny recoiled with terror. She tried to conceal her agitation, to smile, and turn the matter into a joke. "Not to-day," said she. "Another time; you are too curious."

But Sauvresy was terrible in his wrath; he grew as purple as if he were about to have a stroke of apoplexy, and repeated in a choking voice, "The letter, I demand the letter."

"Impossible," said Jenny. "Because," added she, struck with an idea, "I haven't got it here."

"Where is it?"

"In my room, in Paris."

"Come then, let us go there."

"She saw that she was caught; and she could invent no more excuses, quick witted as she was. True, she might easily have accompanied Sauvresy to Paris, allayed his suspicions by her gaiety, and once in the Paris streets, have eluded him and fled. But she did not think of that. It only occurred to her that she might have time to reach the door, open it, and rush down stairs. She started to do so, but Sauvresy bounded after her, caught her, shut the door, and said in a low, hoarse voice, "Wretched girl! Do you wish me to strike you?" He pushed her on to a chair, returned to the door, double locked it, and put the key in his pocket. "Now," said he, returning to the girl, "the letter."

Jenny had never been so terrified in her life. She trembled at the sight of Sauvresy's passion. He was frenzied, and she was utterly at his mercy; however, she still resisted him. "You have hurt me very much," said she, crying, "but I have done you no harm."

He grasped her hands in his, and bending over her, repeated, "For the last time, the letter; give it to me, or I will take it from you by force."

It would have been folly to resist any longer. "Leave me alone," said she. "You shall have it."

He released her, remaining however, close by her side, while she searched all her pockets. Her hair had been loosened in the struggle, her collar was torn, her breath failed her, her teeth chattered, but her eyes gleamed with a bold resolution. "Wait—here it is—no. It's odd—I am sure I've got it

though—I had it a minute ago—” And, suddenly, with a rapid gesture, having cunningly rolled the letter into a ball while yet in her pocket, she jerked it into her mouth, and tried to swallow it. But Sauvresy as quickly grasped her by the throat, and forced her to disgorge it.

He had the letter at last. His hands trembled so violently that he could scarcely open it. It was, indeed in Bertha's hand-writing. Sauvresy tottered with dizziness; all clearness of vision left him; his legs gave way, he staggered, and stretched out his hands for support. Jenny, now somewhat recovered, hastened to help him; but he shuddered at her touch, and repelled her. What had happened he could not tell. Ah, he wished to read this letter and could not. He went to the table, poured out two large glasses of water, and drank them one after the other. The cold draught restored him, his blood resumed its natural course, and sight returned. The note was short, and this is what he read:—“Don't go to-morrow to Petit-Bourg; or rather, return before breakfast. He has just told me that he must go to Melun, and would return late. A whole day!”—“He”—that was himself. Hector's other mistress was Bertha, his wife. For a moment he was conscious of nothing but that; all other thought had fled. His temples beat furiously, and he heard a loud buzzing in his ears. He fell into a chair; his complexion changed from purple to ashy white. Big tears trickled down his cheeks.

Jenny understood how wrongly she had acted, on beholding the grief and despair of this man with a broken heart. She had guessed who had written the note. When she asked Sauvresy to come to her she had intended to tell him everything, and thus avenge herself at once upon Hector and her rival. Then, seeing that this man was unable to understand her hints, she had felt full of pity for him. She had said to herself that he would be the most cruelly punished of all, and so she had recoiled—but too late—and he had snatched the secret from her. She approached Sauvresy and tried to take his hands; but he still repelled her. “Leave me alone,” said he.

“Forgive me, sir—I am a wretch, I am horrified at myself.”

He rose suddenly; he was gradually coming to himself again. “What do you want?” he asked.

“That letter—I guessed—”

He burst into a bitter, discordant laugh, and replied, “God forgive me! Why, my dear, did you dare to suspect my wife?” Then, while Jenny was muttering confused excuses, he drew out his pocket-book and took from it all the money it contained—some seven or eight hundred francs—which he laid on the table. “Take this from Hector,” said he, “he will not allow you to want for anything; but, believe me, you had best let him get married.” Then mechanically taking up his gun, he opened the door, and went out. His dogs leaped up as if to caress him, but he kicked them off. Where was he going? What should he do?”

XVIII.

THE morning fog had risen, and now a fine, chilly rain was falling; but Sauvresy gave it no attention. With his head bare, he wandered across the fields at random. He talked aloud as he went, stopping at times, and then abruptly resuming his course. The peasants who met him—they all knew him—turned to look at him after doffing their caps, and asking themselves whether the master of Valfeuillu had not gone mad. Unhappily he

was not mad. Overwhelmed by an unlooked-for catastrophe, his brain had been momentarily paralysed. But by degrees he collected his scattered ideas and regained the faculty of thinking and suffering. Each reflection increased his anguish. Yes, Bertha and Hector had deceived and dishonoured him. She, whom he had loved to idolatry; he, his best and oldest friend—a wretch he had snatched from misery, who owed him everything. And it was in his house, under his own roof, that this infamy had been perpetrated. They had taken advantage of his noble trust to dupe him. The discovery not only embittered the future, but also the past. He longed to blot out of his existence the time he had lived with Bertha, with whom, but the night before, he had recalled those “happiest years of his life.” The recollection of his former happiness filled his mind with disgust. But how had this happened! When? How was it he had seen nothing? And now certain occurrences returned to memory which should have warned him had he not been blind. He recalled certain looks of Bertha, certain tones of voice which implied her guilt. At times he tried to doubt. There are misfortunes so great that one must have more than evidence to believe in them. “It is not possible?” muttered he.

Seating himself on a fallen tree in the midst of the forest of Mauprévoir, he studied the fatal letter for the tenth time within four hours. “It proves everything,” said he, “and it proves nothing.” And he read once more, “Do not go to-morrow to Petit-Bourg—” Well, had he not again and again, in his idiotic confidence, said to Hector, “I shall be away to-morrow, stay here and keep Bertha company.” This sentence, then, had no positive meaning. But why add, “Or rather, return before breakfast.” This was what betrayed fear, or rather guilt. To go away and return early during his absence implied caution with the view of avoiding suspicion. And then why not speak of him by name as “Clement?” Why only allude to him as “he.” That word “he” was striking. “He” is either the loved one, or the hated master. There is no medium—it implies either the husband, or the lover. “He” is never an indifferent person. A husband is lost when his wife, in speaking of him, says, “He.” But when had Bertha written these few lines? No doubt some evening after they had retired to their room. He had said to her, “I’m going to-morrow to Melun,” and then she had hastily written this note, and given it, in a book, to Hector.

Alas! the edifice of his happiness, which had seemed to him strong enough to defy every storm of life, had crumbled to pieces, and he stood there lost in the midst of the ruins. No more joy or hope—nothing! All his plans for the future rested on Bertha. He had so loved her that she had become something of himself, that he could not have imagined himself without her. Bertha lost to him, he saw no possible hope in life, no further reason for living. He realised this so vividly that the thought of suicide occurred to him. He had his gun, powder, and balls: his death would be ascribed to an accident, and all would be over. Ay, but the guilty ones! They would doubtless persevere in their infamous comedy—and pretend to mourn for him, while in reality their hearts would leap with joy. That scare, the husband, dead, there would be no further cause for hypocrisy or terror. As he left his fortune to Bertha by his will, they would be rich. They would sell everything, and start rejoicing for some distant clime. As for his memory, it would amuse them to think of him as the man they had duped and despised. “Never!” cried he in a fury; “Never! I must kill myself, but first, I must avenge my honour!”

But he tried in vain to think of a punishment sufficiently terrible or cruel to serve as an expiation for the wrong they had done him. Time would be necessary to plan and mature a fitting vengeance. He must wait, and he swore he would. He would feign the same stolid confidence as heretofore, and resign himself to see and hear everything. "My hypocrisy will equal theirs," thought he. Indeed, most cautious duplicity was requisite. Bertha was extremely cunning, and at the first suspicion would fly with her lover. Thanks to him, Hector had already received several hundred thousand francs. The idea that they might escape his vengeance gave him energy and a clear head. It was only then that he thought of the flight of time, and realised that the rain was falling in torrents, and that he was wet through.

"Bah !" said he, "I will concoct some story to account for myself."

He was only a league from Valfeuilu, but it took him an hour and a half to reach home. He was utterly exhausted, and felt chilled to the marrow of his bones. However, by the time he entered the courtyard, he had succeeded in reassuming his usual expression, and the air of gaiety which so well pictured his perfect trustfulness. He had been waited for, but despite all his resolutions, he could not persuade himself to sit at table between this man and woman, his enemies. He accordingly declared that he had taken cold, and would go to bed. Bertha tried in vain to persuade him to take at least a bowl of soup and a glass of claret. "No," said he, "I really don't feel well."

Scarcely had he retired than Bertha remarked, "Did you notice him, Hector ?"

"What ?"

"Something unusual has happened to him."

"Very likely, after being out all day in the rain."

"No. His eye had a look I never saw before."

"He seemed very fagged, but he was cheerful, as he always is."

"Hector, my husband suspects us !"

"He ? Why, he has too much confidence in us to think of being jealous."

"You deceive yourself, Hector ; he did not kiss me when he came in, and it is the first omission since our marriage."

Thus, at the very first, Sauvresy had made a blunder. He knew it well ; but it was beyond his power to kiss Bertha at that moment ; he was suffering more than he thought he should. When his wife and his friend went up to his room, after dinner, they found him shivering under the sheets, with a red face, a burning forehead, a dry throat, and brilliant eyes. Fever soon set in, attended by delirium. A doctor, who was sent for, at first said he would not answer for him. The next day Sauvresy became worse. Hector and Bertha acted as if they were devoted to him. Did they think they might thus in some measure atone for their crime ? It is doubtful, and far more likely that they only wished to impose on the people about them, for every one was anxious concerning Sauvresy. They never deserted him for a moment, but passed the nights by turns near his bed. And it was painful to watch over him ; for delirium never left him. Several times force had to be employed to keep him in bed ; for he tried to throw himself out of the window. The third day he had a strange fancy ; he did not wish to stay in his room, and kept crying out, "carry me away from here, carry me away from here."

As the doctor advised he should be humoured, a bed was made up for him in a little room on the ground floor, overlooking the garden. Curiously

enough and fortunately for his plans he did not betray any of his suspicions during his wanderings ; perhaps his firm will was able even to control the delirium. The fever finally yielded on the ninth day. He breathed more easily, and fell into a long sleep. When he woke again his reason had returned to him. The moment was a terrible one ; he must, so to say, take up once more the weighty burden of his misery. At first he thought himself troubled with the memory of some atrocious night-mare ; but no, he had not dreamed. He easily recalled to mind the Belle Image and Jenny, the forest and the letter ? What had become of the letter ? Then vaguely conscious of having passed through a serious illness, he asked himself if he had perchance betrayed his secret in his ravings. So great was his anxiety on this subject that he dare not make the slightest movement, and only opened his eyes with infinite fear and caution. It was eleven o'clock at night, and all the servants had gone to bed. Only Hector and Bertha were keeping watch ; the former was reading a paper, and the latter working at some embroidery. Sauvresy judged from their placid faces that he had not betrayed his secret. Accordingly he moved slightly, and Bertha, hearing him, at once rose and came to his bedside. "How are you, dear Clement ?" asked she, kissing him fondly on the forehead.

"I am no longer in pain."

"You see the result of being careless."

"How many days have I been ill ?"

"More than a week."

"Why was I brought here ?"

"Because you wished it."

"You refused to stay upstairs," said Trémoré, approaching in his turn, "you were ungovernable till we had you brought here."

"Ah !"

"But don't tire yourself," resumed Hector. "Go to sleep again, and you will be well by to-morrow. I'll say good-night now, for I'm going to bed, but I shall come back and take your wife's place at four o'clock."

"He left the room, and Bertha, having given Sauvresy something to drink, returned to her seat. "What a friend Trémoré is," murmured she.

Sauvresy did not answer this abominable remark. He closed his eyes, pretended to sleep, and thought of the letter. He remembered that he had placed it in the right hand pocket of his coat. He must recover it by some means, for his vengeance would be utterly balked if it fell into his wife's hands ; and this might happen at any moment. It was a miracle that his valet had not laid it on the mantelshelf, as he was accustomed to do with everything he found in his master's pockets. While he was reflecting how he should obtain it, and trying to devise some means of reaching his bedroom, where his coat must be, Bertha rose again, and approaching the bedside on tip-toe, softly whispered, "Clement, Clement !"

He did not open his eyes, and believing that he was asleep, she stole out of the room, holding her breath as she went. "Oh, the wretch !" muttered Sauvresy, "she is going after *him* !" At the same time, he realised more vividly than ever the necessity of recovering the letter. "I can get to my room," thought he, "without being seen, by the garden and the back stairs. She thinks I'm asleep ; I shall get back and in bed again before she returns."

Then, without asking himself whether he were strong enough, or what danger there might be in exposing himself to the cold, he rose, threw a dressing-gown over his shoulders, put on his slippers, and left the room. "If any one sees me, I'll feign delirium," said he to himself.

The hall lamp had gone out, and he found some difficulty in opening the door ; but at last he descended into the garden. Snow had recently fallen, and it was bitterly cold ; a piercing wind sweeping through the leafless trees, swaying their gaunt branches, snapping off the pendant icicles and carrying them away into space. The house formed a dark mass in the midst of the surrounding whiteness. Two windows alone were lighted—that of Sauvresy's room on the ground floor, behind the curtains of which the subdued glimmer of a night lamp could be detected, and that of Trémoré's apartment on the first storey, where a blazing fire, coupled with the burning tapers of two candelabra, created a brilliant illumination. The light was so intense that Sauvresy could plainly distinguish the outline of his friend, standing near the window, his forehead resting against one of the panes. The unfortunate husband instinctively paused to look at the man who, in exchange for the most brotherly hospitality, had dishonoured him, driven him to despair, and brought him nigh to death. Suddenly Hector turned, as if he were surprised by some unexpected sound. Sauvresy immediately guessed the meaning of this incident ; and effectively an instant later the shadow of a female form rested on the curtain. That outline was his wife's. And he had forced himself to doubt till now ! Proof had come to him without his seeking for it. What had brought her to that room at such an hour ? She seemed to be talking excitedly. He fancied he could hear that voice of hers which had made every chord of passion vibrate in his heart ; he fancied he was gazing once more into those beautiful eyes, whose persuasive power he knew so well. From the movements of her shadow, Sauvresy divined that she had gone to Hector's room with some request he refused to grant. He knew her gestures well. Had she not often clasped her hands and bent her head in his presence, as she was doing now ? In his distress, Sauvresy was obliged to lean for support against a tree. He noticed that as Hector seemingly refused his wife's request, she shook her hand and tossed her head as if she were threatening him. But she soon resumed her supplicating attitude. " Ah," thought Sauvresy, "*He* can resist her prayers ; *I* never had the courage to do so. He can retain his nerve and will when she looks at him ; I never said 'no' to her ; in fact, I never waited for her to ask me a favour ; my life was passed in gratifying her fancies before she made them known. Perhaps it was that which ruined me !"

Hector still remained obstinate, and Bertha, abandoning entreaty, once more had recourse to threats. She drew back and gesticulated furiously. At last he was conquered ; he nodded, " Yes," and she flung herself into his arms ; the two shadows being mingled in a long embrace.

Sauvresy could not restrain an exclamation of agony, fortunately lost amid the rumble of passing cart-wheels. He had asked for certainty ; here it was. He need seek for nothing more, save the means for a sure and terrible vengeance. For a moment, Bertha and Hector remained talking, and then Sauvresy noticed that she was about to go downstairs again, so that he could not now search for the letter. He hastily returned into the house, and such was his precipitation, that he forgot to lock the garden door. It was not until he returned to his bedroom that he realised he had been standing in the snow. Perceiving some flakes on his slippers, he quickly threw them under the bed, sprang between the sheets, and pretended to sleep. He was only just in time, for Bertha soon came in. She approached the bed, and on noticing his apparent slumber, returned to her embroidery by the fire. Trémoré, also, soon put in an appearance, osten-

sibly with the view of fetching his newspaper, which he had forgotten ; but his face wore an uneasy look, and he anxiously asked Bertha in a low voice if she had been out that night. "Have all the servants gone to bed?" added he, on receiving a negative reply.

"I suppose so ; but why do you ask me ?"

"While I was upstairs, somebody must have been out into the garden, and come back again."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Bertha with a troubled glance.

"Quite sure, for the ground is covered with snow, and whoever went out brought some back on his shoes. It has melted in the hall."

Madame Sauvresy took up the lamp, and bidding Hector follow her, went out of the room leaving the door ajar. Trémoré was right. Here and there on the hall tiles several little puddles could be perceived. "Perhaps this water has been here some time," suggested Bertha.

"No, I could swear it wasn't there an hour ago. Besides, see, here is a little snow that has not quite melted yet."

"One of the servants must have gone out."

Hector went to the garden-door and examined it. "I don't think so," said he. "A servant would have bolted the door again, but see, the bolts are drawn back, and I distinctly recollect fastening them, for I shut the door to-night myself."

"It's very strange !"

"And all the more so, for the puddles don't extend far beyond the drawing-room door."

They remained silent, and exchanged anxious looks. The same thought occurred to both of them. Suppose it were Sauvresy ? But why should he have gone into the garden ? They scarcely thought it could have been to watch them, for, curiously enough, they did not think of the window. "It couldn't have been Clement," said Bertha, at last. "He was asleep when I went back, and he is still slumbering."

As she said Sauvresy was still to all appearance asleep, but in point of fact he could plainly hear what his enemies were saying. He cursed his imprudence, and devoutly trusted that they would not think of looking at his dressing-gown and slippers. Fortunately this simple idea did not occur to them. They separated after doing their best to reassure one another, though anxious doubt still filled their minds. That night Sauvresy had a terrible crisis, and delirium again resumed possession of his brain. The next morning Doctor R—— declared that his condition was more dangerous than ever, and telegraphed to Paris that he should be detained at Valfeuilu for three or four days. Sauvresy's illness increased in intensity ; most contradictory symptoms showed themselves, and quite baffled the physician's science. Each time that the patient regained his reason, the scene at the window recurred to him, and drove him mad again.

He had not been mistaken in his appreciation of what he had witnessed while standing in the snow. Bertha was really begging something of Hector. It happened in this wise. M. Courtois, the mayor, had invited M. de Trémoré to accompany him and his family on an excursion to Fontainebleau the next day. Hector had cordially accepted the invitation, but Bertha, who could not bear the idea of his absenting himself in Laurence's company, begged him not to go. She pointed out several excuses of which he might avail himself to cancel his promise ; for instance, he might urge that it would not be proper for him to leave Valfeuilu while his friend remained so dangerously ill. At first he positively refused to grant her

prayer, but by dint of supplications and threats she at last persuaded him, and did not go downstairs again till he had sworn to write to M. Courtois that very evening, declining the invitation. He kept his word, but he was disgusted by her tyrannical behaviour. He was utterly tired of always sacrificing his wishes and liberty, of being unable to plan, say, or promise anything without consulting this jealous woman, who would scarcely allow him to leave her sight. The chain was growing heavier every day, and he already foresaw that sooner or later it must be wrenched apart. He had never loved either Bertha or Jenny, in fact he had probably never loved any one at all ; but he was now truly enamoured of the mayor's daughter. He had at first only been dazzled by her dowry, but by degrees Laurence's charms of mind and person had quite fascinated him. Although he was a dissipated rake, and indeed, perhaps, precisely for that reason, he was captivated by the young girl's grace and innocence, frankness and beauty ; indeed, even if Laurence had been poor he would have married her, just as Sauvresy had married Bertha. But he feared his mistress too much to brave her yet, and so he waited. The day after their quarrel about the Fontainebleau excursion, he declared he felt far from well, and attributing his indisposition to want of exercise, took to the saddle for several hours every day afterwards. However he went no farther than the mayor's. Bertha did not at first notice anything suspicious in Trémoré's rides ; it reassured her to see him go off on horseback. But after a short interval she fancied she could detect a certain feeling of satisfaction under the air of fatigue he simulated. She then began to doubt, and all sorts of conjectures worried her while he was away. Where did he go ? Most likely to see Laurence, whom she feared and detested. Suspicion soon ripened into certainty. One evening Hector returned wearing a flower which Laurence herself had given him, and which he had forgotten to remove from his buttonhole. Bertha touched it gently, examined it, smelt it, and forcing herself to smile, remarked that it was very pretty. "So I thought," answered Hector, carelessly, "though I don't know what it is called."

"Would it be bold to ask who gave it to you ?"

"Not at all. It's a present from old Plantat."

All Orcival knew that M. Plantat, a floral monomaniac, never gave any of his flowers to any one except Mademoiselle Laurence, so that Bertha was by no means deceived by Hector's dissimulation. "You promised me," said she, "not to see Laurence any more, and to give up all idea of that marriage." He was going to protest, when she continued : "Let me speak, and explain yourself afterwards. You have broken your word and betrayed my confidence ! But I repeat it, you shall not marry her ?" Then, without more ado, she overwhelmed him with reproaches. Why had he come to Valfeuillu at all ? She was happy before she knew him. She did not love Sauvresy, it was true ; but she esteemed him, and he was kind to her. Ignorant of the happiness of true love, she did not desire it. But he had arrived, she had been unable to resist his fascinations, and now, after having won her affection, he was going to desert her, to marry another woman.

Trémoré listened in amazement. What ! She dared to pretend that *he* had corrupted her innocence, when, on the contrary, he had oftentimes been astonished by her impurity. Such, in his eyes, was the polluted condition of her mind, that he wondered whether he was her first or her twentieth lover. And she had so led him on, and so forcibly made him realize the power of her will, that he had still been fain to submit to her despotic tyranny.

However, he had determined to resist on the first opportunity; and accordingly he did so. "Well, yes," said he, frankly, "I have deceived you. But why? I have no fortune—this marriage will give me one; and so I shall marry." He added, that he loved Laurence less than ever, but that he coveted her money more and more every day. "And to prove that such is the case," he continued, "if you can find me to-morrow a girl with twelve hundred thousand francs instead of a million, I will marry her in preference to Mademoiselle Courtois."

She had never suspected he had even sufficient courage to defend himself in this indirect fashion, and she was disconcerted by his language. Her indignation was mingled, however, with that unhealthy satisfaction that some women feel, when they meet a man who masters them; and she admired Trémoré more than she had ever done before. This time, he had assumed a tone which conquered her; for she thought him quite capable of marrying for money. When he had finished speaking, she said: "So it's really that; you only care for Laurence's dowry?"

"I've sworn it to you a hundred times."

"Truly now, don't you love her?"

"I have never loved her, and never shall." He thought that this language would secure his peace until the wedding-day; once married, he did not mind what happened. What cared he for Sauvresy? Life is only a succession of broken friendships. What is a friend after all? One who can and ought to serve you. Ability consists in breaking with people, when they cease to be useful to you.

Bertha reflected. "Listen to me, Hector," said she at last. "I can't calmly resign myself to such a sacrifice. Give me only a few days, to accustom myself to this dreadful blow. You owe me them—let Clement get well, first."

He did not expect to find her so gentle and subdued: who would have hoped to obtain such concessions so easily. The idea of a snare did not occur to him. In his delight he betrayed how glad he was to recover his liberty, doing so in a manner which should have enlightened Bertha; but she did not or would not perceive it. Ere they separated he grasped her hand, exclaiming: "Ah, you are very good—you really love me."

XIX.

THE Count de Trémoré did not anticipate that the respite Bertha had begged for would last long. Sauvresy had seemed better during the last week. He got up every day, began to go about the house; and even received numerous visits from neighbours without apparent fatigue. But despite this improvement the master of Valfeuillu was only the shadow of his former self. His friends could scarcely recognise him, he had grown to pale and haggard. This was not so much the cause of physical suffering as of mental distress. He did not wish to die before avenging himself on the wretches who had destroyed his happiness. But what punishment should he inflict upon them. In ordinary circumstances the husband who has been wronged may avenge himself in one of three manners. He has the right, and it is almost his duty, to hand the culprits over to the law. He may also adroitly watch, surprise, and kill them. There is a law which does not absolve, but excuses him, in taking this second course. Finally, he may affect stolid indifference, laugh the first and loudest at his misfortune, drive

his wife from his roof, and leave her to starve. But after all these are but sorry modes of vengeance. Give up his wife to the law? Would he not thereby abandon his name and honour to public ridicule? And what satisfaction would he obtain by following this plan? Bertha and Trémorél would merely be condemned to a term of imprisonment, a year or eighteen months, two years at the very most. It seemed to him far more simple to surprise and kill them. But then their agony would only last a moment; whereas he must become a prisoner, submit to trial, invoke a jury's mercy, and risk conviction or acquittal. As to turning his wife out of doors, that was to hand her quietly over to Hector. He could picture them leaving Valfeuillu, hand in hand, perfecting plans for future happiness, and laughing at thought of him. The idea enraged him. No, none of these vulgar methods could satisfy his thirst for vengeance. He longed to inflict upon them some unheard-of punishment as cruel and as enduring as were his own sufferings. There was only one thing that could balk him—Jenny's letter. What had become of it? Had he lost it in the woods or where? He had searched for it everywhere since his recovery, and could not find it. However, despite his desire for revenge he taught himself to feign and wait. He learned how to assume an expression which would hide his thoughts. He endured his wife's caresses with apparent complacency; and shook Hector by the hand as heartily as ever. In the evening, when they met together in the drawing-room table, he was the gayest of the three, building innumerable castles in Spain and projecting countless pleasure parties, to be realised when he was able to get abroad again.

Hector rejoiced to find Sauvresy so rapidly improving. "Clement is getting on admirably," said he to Bertha, one evening.

She understood only too well what he meant. "Always thinking of Laurence?" she remarked.

"Did you not permit me to hope?"

"I asked you to wait, Hector, and you have done well to obey me. I know a woman who would bring you, not one, but three millions as her dowry."

This was a painful surprise, for he really had no thoughts for any one but Laurence. And now a new obstacle presented itself. "And who is that?" he asked,

She leant towards him, and whispered in his ear. "I am Clement's sole heiress; perhaps he'll die; I might be a widow to-morrow."

Hector was petrified. "But, thank God! Sauvresy is getting well fast."

Bertha turned her clear eyes towards him, and calmly said: "What do you know of that?"

Trémorél dare not ask for the meaning of those strange words. He was one of those men who shun explanations, and who, rather than guard themselves against surprises, indolently allow circumstances to draw them into some net, where they remain as powerless as a fly in a spider's web. He was, indeed, one of those feeble beings who deliberately blindfold their eyes, so as not to see the danger that threatens them, and who prefer slothful doubt and uncertain action to the plain frank truth, which they have not the courage to face. He experienced, moreover, a certain amount of childish satisfaction in observing Bertha's distress; and conceived a great opinion of his own value and merit, when he noticed the persistency and desperation with which she sought to retain her hold on him. "Poor woman!" thought he. "She so grieves to lose me, and see me with another woman for my wife, that she has positively begun to wish for her husband's

death!" He was in such a state of moral torpor that he could not even divine the villainy of Bertha's thoughts.

As for his hopes and plans, their realization seemed further off than ever. Sauvresy had a relapse during the night which followed the foregoing conversation between Hector and Bertha; and curiously enough, he was taken bad again after drinking a glass of quinine and water, which was prepared for him according to custom just before supper. This relapse was characterised by very different symptoms to those from which he had previously suffered. It seemed as if the original complaint had given way to another of a very different kind. He complained of vertigo, irritation in the skin, and convulsive twitches, contracting and twisting his limbs, especially his arms. Then came excruciating neuralgic pains in the face, and a violent, tenacious craving for pepper, which nothing could assuage. He couldn't sleep, and morphine in large doses failed to bring him slumber. He complained, moreover, of a strange inner chill, as if his body's temperature were gradually diminishing. Delirium had completely disappeared, and the patient retained full clearness of mind. He bore up wonderfully, and seemed to take a renewed interest in the management of his estates. He was constantly in consultation with his farmers and surveyors, and shut himself up for hours with his notary and attorney. Then, declaring he must have relaxation, he would receive all his friends, and when no one called, send for some acquaintance to come and chat with him, in order to forget his illness. He gave no hint of what he was doing and thinking, and Bertha grew more and more anxious. She often waylaid her husband's agent when he left the sick-room after a conference of several hours, exerting all her cunning, and employing every possible fascination to try and find out what Sauvresy was about. But no one could, or would, satisfy her curiosity; every one she questioned gave an evasive reply, as if Sauvresy had cautioned them not to speak, or as if there were really nothing to tell.

The patient never complained. He talked constantly of Bertha and Hector, as if he wished every one to know how truly they were devoted to him; he called them his "guardian angels," and thanked Providence for having given him such a wife and such a friend. His illness now became so serious that Trémoré grew alarmed. What would be the result of his friend's death? No doubt if Bertha became a widow, she would prove implacable. He must find out her intentions at the first opportunity. One afternoon, while they were alone, M. Plantat being in attendance at the sick man's bedside, she said to her lover: "I want some advice, Hector, which only you can give me. How can I find out whether Clement has changed his will respecting myself within the past day or two."

"His will?"

"Yes, I've already told you that according to a will, which I have a copy of myself, Sauvresy leaves me his whole fortune, but I fear he may revoke it."

"What an idea!"

"Ah, I have grounds for my apprehensions. What are all these agents and lawyers doing at Valfeuilu? A stroke of the pen may ruin me. Don't you see that he can leave his millions to some one else, and reduce me to my dowry of forty thousand francs?"

"But he won't do so; he loves you—"

"Are you sure of it? As I've told you, there are three millions, and I must have them not for myself, but for you; I *must* have them. But how can I find out—how? how?"

Hector felt very indignant. So this was why Bertha had begged him to delay his marriage with Laurence. She thought that she had a right to dispose of him in spite of himself, to buy him at a price, as it were. And he could not, dare not, say anything! "We must be patient," he replied, "and wait—"

"Wait—for what? Till he's dead?"

"Don't speak so."

"Why not?" And approaching her lover, Bertha added in a low voice, "He has only a week to live; see here—" Then drawing a little vial from her pocket, held it before his eyes—"With this no mistake is possible."

Hector turned pale and could not restrain a cry of horror. He understood everything now—why Bertha had not been troubling him lately, why she had refrained from speaking to him of Laurence. "Poison!" stammered he.

"Yes poison."

"You have not used it?"

She gave him a hard, stern look such as had so often subdued his will, and answered in a calm voice, emphasising each word. "I have used it?"

The count was no doubt a reckless unscrupulous man, capable of many an unworthy act when seeking to indulge his passions, but he was horrified at the idea of Bertha's crime. "Well," cried he, "you will not use it again!" and with a shudder he hastened towards the door.

"Reflect before you act," said Bertha, placing herself in front of him. "I will reveal your relations with me, and who will then believe you when you say you are not my accomplice?" He paused, realising the force of this terrible threat. "Come," added Bertha, ironically, "speak—betray me if you choose. But whatever happens, remember we shall remain linked together."

Hector fell into an arm chair, utterly overwhelmed. He held his bursting forehead with his hands; and stammered, scarcely knowing what he said: "I am lost! I am lost! He was to be pitied; the perspiration trickled over his temples, his eyes wandered as if he were insane, his features wore the haggard expression of despair.

"You are afraid," exclaimed Bertha, shaking him rudely by the arm, and exasperated by what she considered his cowardice. "You tremble! Lost? You wouldn't say so, if you loved me as I do you. Will you be lost because I shall be your wife, because we shall be free to love each other openly, before all the world? Lost! Then you have no idea of what I have endured? You don't know then, that I am tired of suffering, fearing, and feigning."

"Such a crime!" he muttered,

"You ought to have said so," she replied, with a look of contempt, "the day you won me from Sauvresy—the day you stole the wife of the friend who saved your life. Do you think that crime was less atrocious? You knew as well as I did how much my husband loved me, and that he would have preferred to die, rather than lose me thus."

"But he knows nothing, suspects nothing of it."

"You are mistaken; Sauvresy knows everything."

"That's impossible!"

"Everything, I tell you—and he has known it ever since the day he came home so late from shooting. Don't you remember I noticed his strange look, and said to you that my husband suspected something? You shrugged your shoulders. Do you forget the water marks in the hall the night I

went to your room? He had been watching us. And if you want more certain proof, look at this letter which I found, soiled and crumpled in one of his coat pockets." So speaking she showed him the letter which Sauvresy had forcibly obtained from Jenny, and Hector recognised it well.

"What a fatality," said he, overwhelmed. "But we can separate. Bertha, I can go away."

"It's too late. Believe me, Hector, we are now defending our lives. Ah, you don't know Clement! He is not the man to leave such a wrong unpunished. If he has said nothing to me, if he has concealed his rage and anger, it is because he is meditating some frightful vengeance."

This was only too probable, as Hector clearly realised. "What shall we do?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"Find out what change he has made in his will."

"But how?"

"I don't know yet. I wanted to ask your advice, and I find you more cowardly than a woman. Let me act then; don't do anything yourself; I will do everything. At least he must not ruin us—I will see—and think of what can be done." At this moment some one down stairs called her, and she left the room, leaving Hector overcome with despair.

That evening, while Bertha was seemingly all happiness and smiles, the count's features so plainly betrayed his inward anguish, that Sauvresy asked him in a tone of concern if he were ill. "You exhaust yourself in attending on me, my dear Hector," said he. "How can I ever repay your devotion?"

Trémorrel had not the strength to reply. "And that man knows everything," thought he. "What courage! What fate can he be reserving for us?"

Each day afterwards the count was condemned to witness a scene which literally made his flesh creep. Each time that Bertha gave her husband his medicine, she plunged a hair pin into the little vial she carried in her pocket, drawing out a few small white grains, which she dissolved in the draughts prescribed by the physician.

It might be supposed that Trémorrel, realising his position, and harassed by increasing terror, would have completely abandoned all idea of marrying Laurence. Not so, however; in fact he clung to the project more desperately than ever. Bertha's threats, the crime now being perpetrated, and the obstacles it would create, only served to inflame his passion for the mayor's daughter. In the midst of his perilous situation, moreover, he retained one faint flickering ray of hope. He said to himself that Bertha could not possibly marry him the day after her husband's death. A whole year must elapse, and thus he would gain time. In due course he would declare his will. How could she resist it? Would she divulge the crime, and try to brand him as her accomplice? If so, who would believe her? How could she prove that he had any interest in Sauvresy's death? Would he not be on the point of marrying another woman? People don't kill their friends for the mere pleasure of the thing. Would she apply to the authorities to exhume her husband's remains? In her present position she could or would not exercise her reason, but later on she must reflect, and the probability of those dangers—the certainty of which failed to terrify her now—would induce her to keep quiet. He did not wish she should ever be his wife at any price. He would have refused her hand even had she possessed millions; and as it happened she would no doubt be virtually ruined, reduced to her meagre dowry. That must certainly be the case if

Sauvresy knew everything. He would never leave his wealth to an unfaithful wife.

So Hector was after all content to wait; he knew that Laurence loved him enough to wait three years for him if necessary. He had completely fascinated her, and rightly divined that she had no thought for anyone but him. After all, said he, it was perhaps as well that Bertha should act as she was doing. This crime by which she sought to strengthen his bonds might on the contrary enable him to recover his liberty. At all events the crime was hers. She had planned it and she was executing it. He himself could only be reproached with moral complicity—in fact, with involuntary complicity forced upon him by the care for his own life. At times, however, he was seized with bitter remorse. He could have understood a sudden, violent, rapid murder, but he was horrified by this infliction of slow death, imparted drop by drop as it were, and cloaked with feigned tenderness and kisses. He acquired as intense a repulsion for Bertha as if she had been a reptile, and would shudder from head to foot when she embraced him. At the same time her *sang froid* astounded him. She was as calm, as engaging, as perfectly natural as ever. She spoke in the same soft caressing tone, and dipped her hair pin into the fatal vial without ever pausing in her talk. He could not even detect the faintest tremble of her hand or the slightest twitching of her eyelids. And yet, despite her impassibility and coolness, he feared she might be discovered. "Have confidence in me," she answered, when he acquainted her with his apprehensions. "I want to succeed—I am prudent."

"But you may be suspected."

"By whom?"

"By any one—the servants, the doctor."

"There's no fear of that; but suppose they did suspect?"

"They would start an investigation, Bertha; they would make a minute scrutiny."

She smiled with that air of security, which a consciousness of perfect impunity can alone impart. "They might examine and experiment as much as they pleased," she said, "but they would find nothing. Do you think I am such a fool as to use arsenic?"

"For heaven's sake, hush!"

"I have procured one of those poisons which are as yet unknown, and defy all analysis; one of those that many doctors—and learned ones, too—could not even tell the symptoms of."

"But where did you get this—this—" He dared not say "poison."

"Who gave it you?" he asked at last.

"That's my concern; but I may tell you this much. I have taken care that the person who gave it me should run the same danger as myself, and he knows it. There's nothing to fear from that quarter. I've paid him enough to quiet all his regrets."

An objection came to Hector's lips; he wanted to say. "It's too slow;" but he had not the courage to do so. However, she read his thought in his eyes. "It is slow, because that suits me," said she. "Before all, I must know about the will—and I am trying to find out if it has been altered."

She occupied herself constantly about this will, and during the long hours she passed at Sauvresy's bedside, she artfully managed to turn his mind to the subject; being indeed so successful as to lead him to speak of it the first. He could not really understand, said he, why people did not

always have their worldly affairs in order, and their wishes written down, in case of accident. What difference did it make whether one were ill or well? At these words Bertha feigned great distress. She urged that the subject was too painful a one to be talked of between them, and she even shed real tears, which positively moistened her handkerchief, and falling down her cheeks seemed to make her more beautiful and irresistible than ever. "You dear silly creature," said Sauvresy, "do you think that my mere making my will would cause my death. Besides you know it is not the case, for on the day after our marriage, I made one bequeathing you all my fortune? And, stop; you have a copy of it, haven't you? Just go and fetch it me."

She flushed scarlet at first, and then turned very pale. Why did he ask for this copy of his will? Did he want to tear it up? A sudden thought reassured her; people do not openly destroy a document which can be cancelled by a scratch of the pen on another sheet of paper. Still she hesitated for a moment, saying, "I don't know where it can be."

"But I do. It is in the left-hand drawer of the glass cupboard; come, please me by getting it."

While she was gone, Sauvresy remarked to Hector, "Poor girl! Poor dear Bertha! If I died, she would never survive me!"

Trémoré's brain was whirling, and he could not muster up sufficient courage to reply. "What!" thought he; "Bertha pretends this man suspects something! No; it is not possible."

When Bertha returned with the copy of the will, Sauvresy read it aloud with an affected air of satisfaction, nodding his head at certain passages in which he referred to his love for his wife. "Now give me a pen and ink," said he, when he had finished reading. Hector and Bertha suggested that it would tire him to write; but he insisted. Standing behind the curtains at the foot of the bed and out of Sauvresy's sight, the lovers exchanged looks of alarm. What was he going to write? At each fresh scratch of the pen they trembled; however he had speedily finished. "Take this," said he to Trémoré; "and read aloud what I have just added."

In a trembling voice Hector complied with his friend's request. "This day, being sound in mind, though in much suffering, I declare that I do not wish to change a line of this will. Never have I loved my wife more—never have I so much desired to leave her the heiress of all I possess, should I die before her.—CLEMENT SAUVRESY."

Bertha was sufficiently mistress of herself to conceal in her husband's presence the satisfaction she felt. Half-an-hour afterwards, however, when she found herself alone with Hector, she gave audible proof of her delight. "We have nothing more to fear," she exclaimed. "Nothing! We shall have liberty, fortune, love, and pleasure before us. Why, Hector, we shall have at least three millions. I shall keep this will safely, and no more agents or notaries shall be admitted into this house as long as he lives. Now I must make haste."

The count certainly felt some satisfaction in knowing that Bertha would be rich, for he could much more easily get rid of a millionaire widow than of a poor penniless woman. Thus Sauvresy's conduct calmed his anxiety. However, he considered that Bertha's restless levity and gaiety were unseemly in a high degree, and he tried to quiet her. But her only reply was to paint another picture of the felicity they would enjoy directly Sauvresy was in his grave. The mere prospect of this anticipated happiness was in such utter contrast with Hector's ideas and plans that for a

moment his better self got the mastery, and he tried to dissuade Bertha from her plan. "For the last time," said he, "I implore you to renounce this terrible, dangerous design. You see that you were mistaken—that Sauvresy suspects nothing, but loves you as well as ever."

Bertha's expression changed; and for a moment she remained in a pensive reverie. "Don't let's talk any more of that," said she, at last. "Perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps he only had doubts, and hopes to win me back by his goodness. But you see—" She paused abruptly, leaving her phrase unfinished. She was evidently afraid of alarming her lover.

But he was already much alarmed, and the next day went off to Melun without a word, being unable to bear the sight of this slow agony, and fearing that he might betray himself. However, he left his address, and when she sent word that Sauvresy was always asking for him, he hastily returned. He had intended to reproach her for summoning him back; but it was she who upbraided him as soon as he arrived. "Why did you fly away like that?" she asked.

"I could not stay here—I suffered too much."

"What a coward you are!"

He would have protested, but, raising her finger to her lip, and pointing to the next room, she added, "Hush! Three doctors have been in consultation there for the past hour, and I haven't been able to hear a word of their remarks. What are they about? I shan't be easy till they go away."

Bertha's fears were not without foundation. When Sauvresy had his last relapse, and complained of severe neuralgic pains in the face and an irresistible craving for pepper, Doctor R—— had uttered a significant exclamation. It was nothing, perhaps—yet Bertha had heard it, and she thought she detected a sudden suspicion on the doctor's part; however, that suspicion, even if it had existed, could not have lasted long, for the symptoms entirely changed twelve hours later, and the next day the patient complained of pains quite the opposite of those which had previously distressed him. It was the inconstancy of his malady which most seemed to puzzle the doctor. Latterly, according to what Sauvresy said, he had scarcely suffered at all, and had slept well at night; but at times he was seized with strange and often distressing sensations. He was evidently failing hourly—dying, in fact, as every one perceived. Dr. R—— eventually suggested a consultation, which was taking place precisely when Trémoré returned. At last the drawing-room door opened, and the culprits felt reassured on glancing at the calm faces of the physicians. The conclusions of the consultation were that the case was hopeless; everything had been tried and exhausted; no human resources had been neglected; the only hope was in Sauvresy's strong constitution. Bertha's eyes were full of tears, and her grief seemed so great, that all the doctors were touched. "Is there no hope, then? O, my God!" cried she, in agonizing tones.

Dr. R—— hardly dared to try and comfort her; he could only answer her questions evasively. "We must never despair," said he, "with a patient of Sauvresy's age and constitution; nature often works miracles when least expected."

On the other hand, however, he lost no time in drawing Hector aside, and begging him to prepare the poor, devoted, loving wife for the terrible blow awaiting her. "For you see," added he, "I don't think M. Sauvresy can live more than two days longer!"

Bertha, with her ear at the keyhole, heard the doctor's prediction; and

when Hector returned to her after conducting the physician to the door, he found her radiant. "Now," cried she, throwing herself into his arms, "the future truly belongs to us. Only one black point darkened our horizon, and it has cleared away. It is for me to realise Dr. R——'s prediction."

They dined together as usual in the dining-room, while one of the maids remained beside the sick-bed. Bertha was full of spirits and could scarcely control herself. The certainty of success and safety made her imprudently gay. She alluded to her approaching liberty even in the servants' presence; and became more and more reckless as the meal progressed. If any of the servants had had the slightest suspicion, or but the shadow of one, she might have been lost; hence Hector constantly touched her foot under the table and frowned at her to keep quiet, but all in vain. There are times when hypocrisy becomes so burdensome that one is compelled at any cost to cast it aside if only for an instant. While the count smoked his cigar, Bertha freely pursued her dream. She could spend the period of her mourning at Valfeuil, she thought, while Hector, for the sake of appearances, hired a pretty little house somewhere in the neighbourhood. The worst of it all was, she must pretend to mourn for Sauvresy, as she had pretended to love him during his lifetime. But at last the day would come when she might cast aside her "weeds," and then they would get married. Where? At Paris or Orcival?

XX.

LATE in the evening Hector and Bertha returned to Sauvresy's room; he was asleep. As usual they quietly sat down near the fire, and the maid retired. In order that the sufferer might not be disturbed by the light of the lamp, the bed-curtains had been drawn so that, while lying down, he could neither see the fireplace nor the mantelshelf. To see them he must have raised himself up on his pillow and leaned forward on his right arm. Now, however, he was in a feverish sleep, breathing with evident difficulty, and shuddering convulsively. Neither Bertha nor Hector spoke; the solemn, almost oppressive, silence was only broken by the ticking of the clock, or by the slight rustle the count occasioned as he turned over the leaves of the book he was reading. Ten o'clock had just struck when Sauvresy moved, turned over, and woke up. Bertha was at his side in an instant; she saw that his eyes were open. "Do you feel a little better, dear Clement?" she asked.

"Neither better nor worse."

"Do you want anything?"

"I feel thirsty."

Hector, who had raised his eyes when his friend spoke, suddenly resumed his reading, while Bertha, standing by the mantelpiece, began to prepare Dr. R——'s last prescription with great care. When it was ready she drew from her pocket the fatal vial, and dipped one of her hair pins into it; but before she had time to draw it out she felt a light touch on her shoulder. Shuddering from head to foot, she turned round and uttered a loud scream. The hand that had touched her was her husband's. While she was busy with the poison near the mantelshelf, Sauvresy had softly raised himself to a sitting position, and in an equally inaudible fashion had drawn the curtain aside, stretched out his arm and touched her. His eyes

glistered with mingled rage and hatred. Bertha's cry was followed by a hoarse groan; for Trémoré had seen and understood everything, and now seemed overwhelmed. "All is discovered!" Their eyes spoke these three words as they furtively glanced at each other. Then came a moment of such profound silence that Hector heard his heart and temples beating. Sauvresy, in the meanwhile, had got back under the bed-clothes again. He laughed loudly, wildly, just as a skeleton might laugh with his jaws and teeth rattling together. But Bertha was not the woman to be overcome by a single blow, however terrible. Physically, her legs staggered, and she trembled like a leaf; but her mind was already at work seeking for a subterfuge. What had Sauvresy seen—anything? What did he know? For even had he seen the vial, this might be explained. He must have touched her at that very moment by mere chance. Perhaps indeed it was so, and constraining herself to smile once more, she dared to approach the bed and say: "How you frightened me!"

He looked at her for a moment—which seemed to her an age—and simply replied, "I understand it."

There was no longer any uncertainty. Bertha only too well realised by the gleam in her husband's eyes that he knew something. But what—how much? She nerved herself to continue. "Are you still suffering?"

"No."

"Then why did you get up?"

He raised himself once more on to his pillow, and with sudden strength resumed: "I got up to tell you that I have been tortured enough, that I have reached the limits of human energy, that I cannot endure one day longer the agony of seeing myself slowly murdered by my wife and my best friend!" Hector and Bertha were thunderstruck. "I wanted to tell you also," he resumed, "that I have had enough of your cruel caution. Can't you see that I suffer horribly? Hurry on with your work; shorten my agony! Kill me, kill me at once, you poisoners!"

At the last word, the Count de Trémoré with haggard eyes and outstretched arms sprang to his feet, as if he had been impelled by a spring. Sauvresy, noticing this movement quickly slipped his hand under the pillow, produced a revolver, and levelling it at Hector, exclaimed—"Don't advance a step!"

He thought that Trémoré, seeing they were discovered, was going to rush on him and strangle him; but he was mistaken. Hector was simply losing his mind, and now fell back heavily on to a chair. Bertha, however, was more self-possessed and tried to battle with her growing terror. "You are worse, Clement," said she. "This is that dreadful fever which frightens me so. Delirium—"

"Have I really been delirious?" interrupted he, with an air of surprise.

"Alas, yes, dear, that is what haunts you, and fills your poor sick head with horrid visions." He looked at her curiously. He was really stupefied by her unflinching audacity—"What!" continued she; "you think that we, who are so dear to you, your friends, I, your—"

Her husband's implacable glance forced her to pause, and the words died away on her lips. "Enough lies, Bertha," resumed Sauvresy, "they are useless. No, I have not been dreaming, nor have I been delirious. The poison is only too real, and I could tell you what it is without your taking it out of your pocket." She recoiled as if she had seen her husband's hand stretched out to snatch the vial. "I guessed it and recognised it at the very first; for you have chosen one of those poisons which, it is true, leave

scarcely any traces behind them but the symptoms of which do not deceive one. Do you remember the day when I complained of a morbid craving for pepper? The next day I was certain of what was going on, and Dr. R—— had a suspicion as well.” Bertha again tried to stammer some reply, but her husband interrupted her. “People ought to try their poisons before they use them,” said he in an ironical tone. “Didn’t you understand yours, or what its effects were? Why, your poison produces intolerable neuralgia and sleeplessness, and you saw me without surprise apparently sleeping soundly all night long! I complained of a devouring internal fire, while your poison freezes the blood and the entrails, and yet you were not astonished. You saw all the symptoms change and disappear, and that didn’t enlighten you. You are fools, then. Now see what I had to do to divert Dr R——’s suspicions. I kept the real pains your poison caused secret, and complained of imaginary, ridiculous ones. The sensations I described were just the opposite of those I felt. You were lost, but I saved you.”

Bertha’s malignant energy staggered under so many successive blows. She wondered if she were going mad; had she heard aright? Was it really true that her husband had perceived he was being poisoned, and yet had said nothing; nay, had even deceived the doctor? Why? What could have been his purpose?

Sauvresy paused for a moment to draw breath, and then went on: “I have held my tongue and so saved you, because I had already sacrificed my life. Yes, I was fatally wounded in the heart when I discovered you were faithless to me.” He spoke of his death without apparent emotion; but on uttering these last words—“You were faithless to me,” his voice faltered and trembled. “I would not, could not believe it at first. I doubted the evidence of my senses, rather than doubt you. But I was forced to believe at last. I was no longer anything but an object of derision in my own house. However, I was in your way. You and your lover needed more liberty. You were tired of constraint and hypocrisy. And so believing my death would make you free and rich, you resorted to poison to get rid of me.”

Bertha had at least the heroism of crime. Everything being discovered, she threw down the mask, and tried to defend her accomplice, who was extended well-nigh unconscious in an arm chair. “It is I that have done everything,” cried she. “He is innocent.”

Sauvresy turned pale with rage. “Ah, really,” said he, “my friend Hector is innocent! So it wasn’t he then who stole my wife from me as a reward I won’t say for having saved his life, for he was too cowardly to kill himself—but for having saved his honour, which he certainly has to thank me for. The wretch! I hold out my hand to him when he is high death and dishonour—I welcome him like a brother, and in return he robs me of my wife. . . And you knew what you were doing, my friend Hector—for I told you a hundred times that my wife was everything to me in the world, my present and future, my happiness, hope, and very life! You knew that it would be death for me to lose her. And if you had even loved her; but—no, you didn’t love her; you hated me. Envy devoured you, and you could not tell me to my face, ‘You are too happy.’ So like a coward, you dishonoured me in the dark. Bertha was only the instrument of your rancour; but she weighs upon you to-day—for now you despise and fear her.”

The count’s only reply was a shudder. The dying man’s terrible words fell more cruelly on his conscience than blows upon his cheek.

"Look, Bertha," continued Sauvresy, "that's the man whom you preferred to me, and for whom you betrayed me. You never loved me—I see it now—your heart was never mine. And I—I loved you so! From the day I first saw you, you were my only thought; it was as if your heart had beaten in place of mine. Everything about you was dear and precious to me; I adored your whims and fancies, even your faults. There was nothing I would not have done for a smile from you, for a 'Thank you,' coming from your lips between two kisses. You don't know that for years after our marriage it was my delight to wake up first in the morning so as to look at you as you lay asleep, to admire and touch your hair, lying dishevelled across the pillow. Bertha!" He softened at the remembrance of those past joys, never to recur again. He forgot the treachery and the poison; he forgot that he was about to die, murdered by the wife he had loved so fondly, and his eyes filled with tears and his voice choked. Bertha, as pale and as motionless as if she had been a marble statue, held her breath as she listened to him—"Ah, who could have told," continued he, "that those lovely eyes concealed a soul of filth! Ah, who would not have been deceived, as I was? Bertha, what did you dream of when you were sleeping in my arms? Trémoré came, and you fancied he realised the ideal of your dreams. You admired the precocious wrinkles which betrayed an exhausted life, forgetting they were as the fatal seal marking the fallen archangel's forehead. Your love, without thought of mine, rushed towards him and this, even though he did not think of you. You went to evil as if it were your nature. And yet I thought you more immaculate than Alpine snow. You did not even struggle with yourself; you betrayed no confusion which might have revealed your fault to me. You offered me without a blush he had soiled with *his* kisses."

Weakness overcame him, and he continued less distinctly: "You had your happiness in your own hands, Bertha, and you carelessly destroyed it just like a child breaks a toy; but he has some excuse, for he is ignorant of its value. What did you expect from this wretch for whose sake you had the frightful courage to kill me slowly, hour by hour, with a kiss on your lips? You thought you loved him, but disgust should have come at last. Look at him, and judge between us. Which of the two is the real man—I, extended on this bed where I shall soon die, or he shivering there in a corner. You have the energy, but he has only the baseness of crime. Ah, if my name were Hector de Trémoré, and a man had spoken as I have just done, that man should live no longer, even if he had ten revolvers, like the one I am holding, to defend himself with!"

Hector, thus taunted, tried to rise and reply; but his legs refused to support him, and he could not speak. Bertha, as she looked at the two men, recognised her error with rage and indignation. At that moment her husband seemed to her sublime; his eyes gleamed and his face was radiant; while the other—the other! She felt sick with disgust when she but glanced at him. Thus all those deceptive chimeras she had sought for—love, passion, and poetry had been already hers; she had held them in her hand, and had not been able to perceive them. But what was Sauvresy's purpose?

"This then is our situation," he continued with increasing feebleness, "you have killed me and you will soon be free; and yet you hate and despise each other." He paused as if he were suffocating; and on trying to raise himself on his pillow and sit up in bed, he found his strength unequal to the task. "Bertha," said he, "help me get to up."

She leant over the bed, and taking her husband in her arms, succeeded in placing him as he wished. He appeared more at ease in his new position, and drew two or three long breaths. "Now," said he, "I should like something to drink. The doctor lets me take a little old wine, if I have a fancy for it; give me some." She at once brought him a glass of wine, which he emptied and handed back to her. "There wasn't any poison in it, was there?" he asked.

This ghastly question, and the smile which accompanied it, melted Bertha's heart. Her mind was full of remorse and disgust of her abject lover. "Poison?" she cried, eagerly. "Never!"

"You must give me some, though, presently, so as to help me to die,"

"You die, Clement? No; I want you to live, so that I may redeem the past. I am a wretch, and have committed a hideous crime; but you are good. You will live; I don't ask to be your wife, but only your servant. I will love you, humiliate myself, serve you on my knees, so that some day, after ten, twenty years of expiation, you will perhaps forgive me!"

Hector's terror and anguish were such that he was scarcely able to realise what was taking place. But he detected a dim ray of hope in Bertha's last words; and with singular optimism half thought that it was perhaps all going to end and be forgotten, and that Sauvresy would pardon them. Half-rising from his seat he stammered: "Yes, forgive us, forgive us!"

Sauvresy's eyes glittered, and his angry voice vibrated as powerfully as if it came from a throat of metal. "Forgive you!" cried he; "have you had any pity on me all the while you have been playing with my happiness, all the while you have been mixing poison with my medicine? Forgive you! What! are you fools? Do you think I held my tongue when I discovered your infamy, and let myself be poisoned, and threw the doctors off the scent merely to oblige you? Do you really hope I did this simply to prepare a scene of heartrending farewells, and give you my benediction at the end? Ah, you must learn to know me better!"

Bertha was sobbing; she tried to take her husband's hand, but he roughly repelled her. "Enough of these falsehoods," said he. "Enough of this perfidy. I hate you both! You don't seem to perceive that hate is all that remains alive in me." Sauvresy's expression was at this moment perfectly ferocious. "Nearly two months ago I learnt the truth; it broke me up, soul and body. Ah, it cost me an effort to keep quiet, indeed it almost killed me. But one thought sustained me; I longed to avenge myself. My mind was always bent on that; I searched for a punishment equal to the crime; and at first I could find none. Then you resolved to poison me. Mark this—the very day I guessed about the poison I was overjoyed, for I had discovered my vengeance! Why do you wish for my death? To be free and marry each other? Very well; I wish that also. The Count de Trémoré will be Madame Sauvresy's second husband."

"Never!" cried Bertha and Hector in one breath. They were both terrified and overwhelmed beyond expression.

"It shall be so, nevertheless; for such is my will. Oh, my precautions have been well taken, and you can't escape me. Now listen. When I became certain that I was being poisoned, I began to write a minute history of all three of us; I did more—I have kept a journal day by day and almost hour by hour, narrating all the particulars of my illness; and in addition I have preserved some of the poison you administered to me—" Bertha made a gesture of denial, but Sauvresy proceeded: "Certainly I have, and I will tell you how. Every time that Bertha gave me a suspicious

draught, I retained a portion of the dose in my mouth, and carefully ejected it into a bottle which I kept hidden under the bolster. Ah, you wonder how I could have done all this without your suspecting it, or without being seen by any of the servants. You must learn that hate is stronger than love, and you may be quite certain I have neither forgotten anything nor left anything to chance."

Hector and Bertha looked fixedly at Sauvresy, trying to understand him, but they could scarcely do so. "Let's finish," resumed the dying man; "my strength is failing. This very morning, the bottle containing the poison I have preserved, with our biographies, and the narrative of my poisoning, have been placed in the hands of a most trustworthy person, whom you could not corrupt, even if you found out who he was. He does not know the contents of the various packets confided to him, and the day you are married he will return you everything; but if you are not married in a year from to-day, he has instructions to place these papers and this bottle in the hands of the officers of the law." A faint cry of horror and anguish told Sauvresy that he had fittingly chosen his vengeance. "And reflect," added he, "that if this package is delivered up to justice, the galleys, if not the scaffold, will be in store for both of you."

Sauvresy had overtasked his strength. He fell back panting on to the bed, with open mouth, filmy eyes, and features so distorted that he seemed to be on the point of death. But neither Bertha nor Trémoré thought of trying to relieve him. They remained opposite each other with dilated eyes, literally stupefied, as if their thoughts were turned in anticipation to the torments of the future which Sauvresy's vengeance imposed upon them. Their destiny must be the same; nothing could separate them but death. They would be bound together by a chain stronger and heavier than any galley slaves were coupled with; a chain of infamy and crime having for its first link a kiss, and for its last—murder by poison. Now Sauvresy might die; his vengeance would take effect. Free in appearance, they would go through life crushed by the burden of the past—far greater slaves in reality than any negro toiler in the American rice fields. Morally separated by mutual hate and contempt, they yet saw themselves riveted together and condemned to an eternal embrace. Bertha at this moment admired her husband. Now that he was so feeble that he could scarcely breathe, she looked upon him as if he were a superhuman being. She had had no idea of such constancy and courage, coupled with such dissimulation and genius. How cunningly he had found them out! How skilfully he had chosen his vengeance. She almost found a morbid attraction in the strange atrocity of this scene; and felt something like a bitter pride in being one of the actors in it. But at the same time she was overwhelmed with rage and sorrow on thinking that she had had this man in her power, that he had been at her feet. She almost loved him now. She would have chosen him of all men, had she yet been mistress of her destiny; but, alas! he was going to escape her.

While these strange ideas crowded upon Bertha's mind, Trémoré tried to recover some little self-possession. He realised that Laurence was now for ever lost to him, and the thought filled him with despair. The silence continued a full quarter of an hour, but Sauvresy at last conquered the spasm which had exhausted him, and spoke again. "I have not yet said everything," he commenced. His voice was so feeble it could be scarcely heard, and yet it terrified his listeners. "You shall judge whether I have reckoned and foreseen everything. Perhaps, when I am dead, the idea of

flying and going abroad might occur to you. I shall not permit that. You must stay at Orcival—at Valfeuilu. A friend—not the one who has the package—is charged with the task of watching you, and he will do so, though he does not know the reason of my request. Mark well what I say—if either of you should disappear for eight days, on the ninth the man who has the package will receive a letter which will lead him to apply to the police. In addition, I have so arranged matters that you will not be particularly tempted to fly. It is true I have left all my fortune to Bertha, but I only give her the use of it; the property itself will not be hers until the day after your marriage. Bertha made a gesture of repugnance, which her husband misinterpreted. “You are thinking of the copy of my will which is in your possession,” said he. “It is a useless one, and I only added some valueless words to it because I wanted to quiet your suspicions. My true will is in the notary’s hands, and bears a date two days later. I can read you the rough draft of it.” Drawing a sheet of paper from a portfolio which was concealed, like the revolver, under the bolster, he read as follows: “Being stricken with a fatal malady, but having the full enjoyment of my faculties, I hereby declare it to be my express desire that my beloved widow, Bertha, should espouse as soon as the delay enjoined by law has expired, my dear friend, the Count Hector de Trémoré. Having appreciated the grandeur of soul and nobility of sentiment which distinguish both my wife and friend, I know that they are well worthy of each other, and that each will be happy by contracting such a marriage. I die the more peacefully, as I leave my wife to a protector whose—”

It was impossible for Bertha to hear any more. “For pity’s sake,” cried she, “enough.”

“Enough? Well, let it be so,” replied Sauvresy. “I wanted to read this paper to you to show you that while I have arranged everything to insure the fulfillment of my scheme, I have also done all that can guarantee you the world’s respect. Yes, I wish you to be esteemed and honoured; for I rely for my vengeance on yourselves alone. You will find yourselves in a network from which you cannot escape. My tombstone shall be, as you hoped, the altar of your nuptials, or else—the galleys.”

Trémoré’s pride at last revolted against such crushing humiliation. “You have only forgotten one thing, Sauvresy,” said he; “a man can die.”

“Excuse me,” replied the sick man coldly. “I have foreseen that also, and was just going to tell you so. Should one of you die suddenly before the marriage, the police will be called in.”

“You misunderstood me; I meant that a man can kill himself.”

“You kill yourself? Humph! Jenny, who has nearly as much disdain for you as I have myself, has told me all about your pretended threats to kill yourself. You kill yourself. Well, look here; take my revolver, shoot yourself, and I will forgive my wife!” Hector made a gesture of anger, but did not take the weapon. “You see,” said Sauvresy, “I knew it well enough. You are afraid.” And turning to Bertha, he added, “That man’s your lover.”

Time was flying, and Sauvresy realised that life was fast failing him. “There only remains one more act to play,” said he. “Hector, go and call the servants, let those who have gone to bed be roused, for I want to see them all before dying.”

Trémoré hesitated. “Come, make haste; or shall I ring, or fire off my revolver to bring them here?”

Hector left the room, and Bertha remained alone with her husband. Alone!

At this moment she had a hope that perhaps she might divert him from his purpose, and even obtain his forgiveness. She knelt beside the bed. Never had she been so beautiful and so seductive. The keen emotions of that night had brought her whole soul into her face so to say, and her eyes supplicated, her bosom heaved, and her new-born passion for Sauvresy burst out into delirium. "Clement," she stammered, in a voice full of tenderness, "my husband, Clement!"

He gave her a glance of bitter hatred. "What do you want?" he asked.

Not knowing how to begin, she hesitated, trembled, and sobbed. "Hector would not kill himself," she said at last, "but I—"

"Well, what do you wish to say? Speak!"

"It is I who have killed you. I will not survive you."

A pang of anguish contracted Sauvresy's features. She kill herself! If so, his vengeance was vain; his own death would then appear ridiculous. And he knew that Bertha would not be wanting in courage at the critical moment. He reflected how he should answer her.

"You are free, of course," said he, eventually, "but this would merely be sacrificing yourself to Hector. If you died, he would marry Laurence Courtois, and in a year's time would forget even our names."

Bertha sprung to her feet; she pictured Hector married and happy. Meanwhile a smile brightened Sauvresy's pale face. He had touched the right chord, and might sleep in peace; for now his vengeance was safe. Bertha would live. He knew what bitter hate animated these two enemies whom he left linked together.

The servants came in one by one; nearly all of them had been long in Sauvresy's service, and they loved him as a good master. The women went to see him lying there so pale and haggard, with the mark of death already on his forehead. Sauvresy spoke to them in a feeble voice, which was occasionally interrupted by distressing hiccoughs. He thanked them, he said, for their attachment and fidelity, and wished to apprise them that he had left each of them a goodly sum in his will. Then turning to Bertha and Hector, he continued, "You have witnessed, my friends, the care and solicitude with which I have been attended by my dear wife and friend here. You have seen their devotion, and I know how keen their sorrow will be! But if they wish to soothe my last moments and give me a happy death, they will assent to my last earnest prayer and will swear to marry each other after I am gone. Oh, my dear friends, this seems cruel to you now; but you are young and life has yet much happiness in store for you. I beg you to yield to a dying man's entreaties!"

The guilty pair approached the bed, and Sauvresy placed Bertha's hand in Hector's. "Do you swear to obey me?" asked he. They shuddered as they touched each other's hand, and well-nigh fainted; but at last their lips parted, and they were heard to murmur. "We swear it."

As the servants retired, greatly distressed, Bertha could not refrain from muttering, "It's too infamous, too horrible!"

"Infamous—yes," rejoined Sauvresy, "but not more so than your embraces, Bertha, or than your affected cordiality, Hector; not more horrible than your plans, your hopes—" His voice died away in a rattle. Soon the last agony began. Horrible convulsions distorted his limbs; and two or three times he was heard to cry, "I am cold; I am cold!" His body was indeed chilled, and nothing could warm it. Despair filled the house, for so sudden a death was scarcely looked for. The servants went to and fro,

whispering to each other, "he's sinking. How terribly grieved poor madame will be."

Soon the convulsions ceased, and he lay for a while extended on his back, breathing so feebly that twice they thought him already dead. At last, a slight flush came to his cheeks and he shuddered once more. He rose up in bed with staring eyes, and arms stretched out towards the window, There—behind the curtain—I see them—I see them!" he cried. Then a last convulsion stretched him on the pillow again. Clement Sauvresy was dead.

XXI.

PAPA PLANTAT ceased reading his voluminous record. His listeners, the detective and the doctor, remained silent under the influence of this distressing narrative, which he had read most impressively, throwing himself into the recital as if he had been personally an actor in the scenes described.

M. Lecoq was the first to recover himself. "A strange man, Sauvresy," said he. What had most struck him in the story was Sauvresy's scheme of vengeance, and the coolness he had still displayed when life was failing him. "I don't know many people," continued the detective, "who would have been capable of such firmness. To allow himself to be slowly poisoned by his wife! Brrr! It makes one positively shiver!"

"He knew how to avenge himself," muttered the doctor.

"Yes," answered M. Plantat; "yes, doctor; he knew how to avenge himself, and more terribly than he supposed, or than you can imagine."

The detective now rose to his feet. He had remained seated for more than three hours, and his legs were cramped and numb. "For my part," said he, "I can very well imagine what an infernal existence the murderers must have led ever since their victim's death. You have depicted them, Monsieur Plantat, with a master-hand. After your description, I know them as well as if I had personally studied them for ten years." He spoke deliberately, scrutinizing M. Plantat as if he wished to detect what effect his remarks would have. "Where on earth did this old fellow get all these particulars?" he asked himself. "Did he write this narrative, and if not, who did? And having all this information, how is it he said nothing before?"

M. Plantat was seemingly unconscious of the detective's searching gaze. "I know that Sauvresy's body was not cold," said he, "before his murderers began to threaten each other with death."

"Unfortunately for them," observed Dr. Gendron, "Sauvresy had foreseen the contingency of his widow wishing to utilise the rest of the poison."

"Ah, he was shrewd," said M. Lecoq, in a tone of conviction, "very shrewd."

"Bertha could not forgive Hector," continued M. Plantat, "for refusing to take the revolver and blow his brains out; Sauvresy, you see, had foreseen that. Bertha thought that if her lover had killed himself, her husband would have forgiven her. However, it is impossible to say whether she was right in this surmise or not."

"And nobody knew what was going on in the house?" asked the detective.

"No one had the slightest suspicion."

"It's marvellous!"

"Say, M. Lecoq, that it is scarcely credible, but then both Bertha's and

Hector's dissimulation was positively wonderful. Question any one you like in Orcival, they will all tell you, like our friend Courtois told M. Domini this morning, that the count and countess were a model pair and adored each other. Why I, who knew—or I should say who suspected what had passed, was deceived myself."

Promptly as M. Plantat had corrected himself, his slip of the tongue did not escape M. Lecoq. "Which was the right word?" he asked himself. "Did he really know or merely suspect?"

"These wretches have been terribly punished," resumed M. Plantat; "but it is impossible to pity them; all would have gone on rightly enough if Sauvresy, mad with hatred, had not committed one blunder which almost amounted to a crime."

"A crime!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Laurence," muttered M. Lecoq, with an involuntary smile.

But low as he had spoken, M. Plantat heard him. "Yes, M. Lecoq," said he severely. "Yes, Laurence. Sauvresy acted very wrongly when he selected that poor girl as the accomplice, or I should say, the instrument of his wrath. He threw her between these two wretches, without asking himself what might be her fate. It was by using Laurence's name that he persuaded Bertha not to kill herself, yet he knew of Trémoré's passion for the mayor's daughter, and her love for him, and besides he was quite aware that his friend was capable of anything. He, who had so carefully foreseen everything that could ensure his vengeance, did not deign to reflect that Laurence might be dishonoured; and yet he left her unarmed in presence of a scoundrel's infamous designs!"

The detective reflected. "There is one thing," said he, "that I can't explain. How was it that these two wretches, hating each other and bound together despite themselves, did not separate of their own accord the day after their marriage? They had then fulfilled the condition exacted by Sauvresy."

"I see," answered M. Plantat, "that you have not fully realised Bertha's resolute character. Hector would have been delighted with a separation; but his wife would not consent to one. Ah, Sauvresy knew her well! Her life was wrecked, she was a prey to intolerable remorse. She could not bear this load alone. She needed a victim whom she could force to expiate her own crimes and errors. The victim she chose was Hector, and she would not let him go for anything in the world."

"I' faith," observed Dr. Gendron, "your Trémoré was a chicken-hearted scoundrel. What had he to fear when Sauvresy's manuscript was once destroyed?"

"Who told you it had been destroyed?" interrupted M. Plantat.

M. Lecoq who had hitherto been walking up and down the room, abruptly paused and sat down opposite M. Plantat. "The whole case lies there," said he; "everything depends on whether these proofs have been destroyed or not."

M. Plantat did not choose to give a direct answer. "Do you know," asked he, "to whom Sauvresy confided them?"

"Ah," cried the detective suddenly enlightened, "it must have been to you." And he added to himself, "Now, my good man, I begin to see where all your information comes from."

"Yes," resumed M. Plantat, "the package was confided to me, and conformably with Sauvresy's instructions I went to Valfeuillu on the day that Hector and Bertha were married and asked to see Monsieur and

Madame de Trémoré. The house was full of company, but they received me at once in the little room on the ground floor where Sauvresy was murdered. They were both very pale and seemed greatly troubled. They evidently guessed the purpose of my visit, for they lost no time in admitting me to an interview. I at once addressed myself to Bertha, as I was enjoined to do by the written instructions I had received—another instance of Sauvresy's foresight. 'Madame,' said I, 'I was charged by your late husband to hand you, on the day of your second marriage, this package, which he confided to my care.' She took the package, in which the bottle and the manuscript were enclosed, with a smiling, even joyful air, and thanking me warmly, at once went out of the room. The count's expression instantly changed, and he seemed extremely restless and agitated; I guessed well enough that he wanted to run after his wife, but that he scarcely dared to do so, through fear of betraying himself. However, after an effort he abruptly exclaimed, 'Excuse me for one minute. I will return immediately,' and with these words he hurriedly left the room. When I saw him and his wife again a few minutes afterwards they were both very flushed; their eyes had a strange expression and their voices trembled, as they spoke while accompanying me to the door. They had certainly been having a violent altercation."

"The rest may be conjectured," interrupted M. Lecoq. "She had gone to secrete the manuscript in some safe place; and when her new husband asked her to give it him, she bade him look for it."

"Sauvresy had enjoined me to give it to her alone."

"Oh, he knew how to secure his revenge. He had it given to his wife so that she might hold it as a terrible weapon against Trémoré. If he revolted, she always had this instrument of torture at hand. Ah, the man was a miserable wretch, and she must have made him suffer terribly."

"Yes," said Dr. Gendron, "up to the very day he killed her."

The detective had resumed his promenade up and down the library. "We have now," said he, "only to deal with the question of the poison, administered to Sauvresy, and it's a simple one to solve, for we've got the man who sold it to her in that closet,"

"Oh, I can tell you something about it," rejoined the doctor. "That rascal Robelot stole it from my laboratory, and I should know what it was even if our friend Plantat had not described the symptoms. I was at work upon aconite when Sauvresy died; and he was poisoned with aconitine."

"Ah, with aconitine," said M. Lecoq, surprised. "It's the first time I've ever had to deal with that poison. Is it a new thing?"

"Not exactly. Medea is said to have extracted her deadliest poisons from aconite, and it was employed by the Greeks and Romans in criminal executions."

"Indeed! And I did not know of it! But I have very little time to study. Besides, Medea's recipe was perhaps lost, just like the Borgias'; so many of these things are!"

"No, it was not lost, but we only know of it nowadays by Mathioli's experiments on condemned felons, in the sixteenth century; and through Hers, who isolated the active principle, the alkaloid, in 1833. Bouchardot has also made certain experiments and pretends—"

When Dr. Gendron began to talk of poisons, it was difficult to stop him; but M. Lecoq fortunately never lost sight of his object. "Excuse me for interrupting you, doctor," said he. "But would traces of aconitine be

found in a body after it has been buried for two years? For M. Domini will have to order the exhumation of Sauvresy's remains."

"Such tests as are generally known do not enable one to isolate it substantially. Bouchardot tried ioduret of potassium, but his experiment was not successful."

"The deuce!" said M. Lecoq. "That's annoying."

The doctor smiled benignly. "Reassure yourself," said he. "As no satisfactory process existed, I invented one."

"Ah," cried Plantat. "Your sensitive paper!"

"Precisely."

"And could you find aconitine in Sauvresy's body?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Very well then," said M. Lecoq with a radiant look. "Our inquiry seems to me complete. M. Plantat's narrative gives us the key to all the events which followed Sauvresy's death. We know that this couple who seemed so united really hated one another; and we also know why Hector dishonoured a charming young girl with a splendid dowry, instead of marrying her. There is nothing surprising in Trémorel's casting aside his name and personality to reappear as some one else; he killed his wife because he was constrained to do so by the logic of events. He could not fly while she was alive, and yet he could not continue to live at Valfeuilu. The paper he searched for with such desperation, when every moment was an affair of life and death to him, was none other than Sauvresy's manuscript, the proof of his first crime, and the key to the second." The detective talked eagerly, as if he had a personal animosity against the Count de Trémorel; indeed such was his nature; and he owned with a laugh that he could not help having a grudge against the criminals he searched for. There was an account to settle between him and them; hence the ardour of his pursuit. Perhaps it was a simple matter of instinct with him, like that which impels a hound after a fox. "It is clear enough now," continued he, "that it was Mdlle. Courtois who put an end to Trémorel's hesitation and delay. He was goaded on by the obstacles which his passion for her encountered. On learning her condition, he lost his head and forgot both prudence and reason. He was wearied, too, of the life he led with his wife. At any moment she might choose to sacrifice herself for the malignant pleasure of sacrificing him. No doubt there were stormy scenes between them, and at last terrified and enraged he resolved to commit this murder."

"What you said a moment ago surprises me," observed Dr. Gendron. "Do you really believe in Mdlle. Laurence's complicity?"

"No, doctor, certainly not," replied the detective with a gesture of denial, "heaven forbid that I should have such an idea. Mdlle. Courtois was and is still ignorant of this crime. But she knew that Trémorel would abandon his wife for her. They had discussed, planned, and agreed upon flight between them; making an appointment to meet at a certain place, on a certain day."

"But the letter she wrote to her parents," observed the doctor.

M. Plantat could scarcely conceal his emotion when Laurence was being talked about. "This letter," cried he, "which has driven her family mad with grief, and may perhaps kill poor Courtois, is only an additional feature of the count's infamous plan."

"Is that possible?" asked the doctor.

"I am firmly of M. Plantat's opinion," said the detective. "Yesterday

evening, while we were at the mayor's, we both had the same suspicion at the same moment. I read and re-read her letter, and could have sworn that, barring the handwriting, it did not emanate from herself. The count must have given her a rough draft, which she copied. We mustn't deceive ourselves; this letter was composed at leisure, every phrase, every word, was carefully thought over beforehand. Those were not the expressions that would naturally come to an unhappy girl about to kill herself to escape dishonour."

"Perhaps you are right," remarked the doctor. "But how can Trémorel have succeeded in persuading her to write such a letter?"

"How? Well, doctor, I have not much experience in these things, having seldom had occasion to study the characters of girls moving in such a circle as herself, and yet it seems to me very simple. Mademoiselle Courtois saw the time approaching when her disgrace would become public. She was evidently anxious to avoid exposure, and was even prepared to die if necessary."

M. Plantat shuddered; a conversation he had had with Laurence sometime previously recurred to him. He remembered she had questioned him about certain poisonous plants he was cultivating, and had anxiously inquired how the poisonous juice was extracted from them. "Yes," said he, "she did think of dying."

"Well," resumed the detective. "One day when she was in such a mood she undoubtedly told her lover that she preferred death to shame, and he argued that in her condition she had no right to kill herself. He no doubt, said, that he was very unhappy; and that, linked as he was, he could not repair his fault. Still he offered to sacrifice his position and future prospects and to devote himself to her. To save them both she must abandon her parents and make them believe she had committed suicide, while he, on his side, deserted his home and wife. No doubt she resisted for awhile; but at last she must have consented; they fled, and then she copied and posted the letter which Trémorel had composed beforehand."

The doctor was convinced. "Yes," muttered he; "that is how it must have occurred."

"But what an idiot the count was," resumed M. Lecoq, "not to perceive that the strange coincidence between his disappearance and Laurence's suicide would be remarked! However, he probably said to himself that people would think he had been murdered as well as his wife, and that the law would select Guespin as the real culprit and not look for any other."

"Ah," cried M. Plantat in a plaintive tone, "and we can't tell where the scoundrel has fled!"

"Don't be uneasy," replied Lecoq, pressing the old magistrate's arm in sympathetic fashion. "We'll find him, or my name's not Lecoq; and to tell the truth I really don't think our task a difficult one."

At this moment he was interrupted by several timid knocks at the door. Madame Petit had already been up some time, and anxiety and curiosity had prompted her to approach the library at least a dozen times. Fortunately the key was in the lock on the inner side and she could neither see nor hear anything.

"What can they be up to in there?" said she to Louis. "They've been shut up for twelve hours without going to bed or even eating or drinking. At all events I'll get breakfast ready."

However it was not Madame Petit, who now ventured to knock at the door, but Louis the gardener, who came to tell his master of the destruction

he had found among his flower-pots and shrubs. At the same time he brought with him certain singular articles which he had picked up on the lawn, and which M. Lecoq recognised at once. "Heavens !" cried he, "I'm forgetting myself. Here am I quietly talking with my face exposed, as if it was not broad daylight ; and people might come in at any moment !" And turning to Louis, who was extremely surprised to see this dark young man whom he had certainly not admitted the night before, he added : "Give me those things, my good fellow ; they belong to me."

Then, while the master of the house went out to give some orders, M. Lecoq readjusted his wig and whiskers so deftly that when M. Plantat returned, he could scarcely believe his eyes. They breakfasted as silently as they had dined the evening before, losing no time over the meal, for they appreciated the value of each passing minute ; M. Domini was waiting for them at Corbeil, and was no doubt growing impatient at their delay. Louis had just placed some fruit on the table, when M. Lecoq suddenly remembered that Robelot was still shut up in the closet. "The rascal may be in want of something," said he.

M. Plantat wished to send the servant ; but the detective remarked that Robelot was a dangerous rogue, and that he had best go himself. Scarcely had he left the dining-room, however, than he was heard calling for Papa Plantat and the doctor, who, hastening in their turn into the library, perceived the bone-setter's body stretched across the threshold of the closet. He had killed himself.

XXII.

ROBELOT must have had rare nerve and courage to kill himself in that dark closet, without even making enough noise to warn the occupants of the library. Having wound a piece of string tightly round his neck, he had used a pencil as a twister, and so strangled himself. His features, however, were by no means so hideously distorted as usually occurs in cases of strangulation, at least according to popular belief. His face was pale, his eyes and mouth half open, and he had the appearance of a person who has gradually and well-nigh painlessly lost consciousness by congestion of the brain. "Perhaps he is not quite dead yet," said the doctor, quickly pulling out his case of instruments and kneeling beside the motionless body.

This incident seemed to cause M. Lecoq great annoyance. Everything was running on wheels, he said, and now his principal witness, whom he had caught at the peril of his life, had escaped him. M. Plantat, on the contrary, seemed tolerably well satisfied, as if Robelot's death furthered his secret hopes and plans. Besides, as he remarked, this event was of little consequence, if the detective's only object was to oppose M. Domini's theories and induce him to change his opinion. This dumb, rigid corpse furnished quite as eloquent testimony as the most explicit confession. Dr. Gendron soon perceived that he was taking useless trouble, and remarking that Robelot had been dead some hours, he got up and assisted the others in laying the body on the library floor. "We must have him carried home," said M. Plantat, "and we will go to his place ourselves so as to seal up his effects, which perhaps contain important papers. Run to the mairie," he added, turning to his servant, "and get a litter and two strong men."

Dr. Gendron's presence being no longer necessary, he promised M.

Plantat to join him at Robelot's, and in the meanwhile started off to see how the mayor was getting on. Louis had soon returned with ten men in lieu of two, and the body being placed on a litter was carried away. Robelot occupied a little three-roomed house, where he lived by himself; the front apartment served him as a herbalist's shop, while that in the rear, better furnished than is usually the case in the country, was utilized as a bedroom. Among the men who brought the corpse was that imposing functionary, the town crier, who in this instance also happened to be the local grave-digger. By his instructions Robelot's body was laid on the bed, and as he was naturally expert in everything pertaining to funerals, he gave a number of other directions suited to the occasion, condescendingly lending a helping hand at the same time.

In the meanwhile M. Plantat examined the various drawers and cupboards, the keys of which had been taken from the deceased's pocket. The value of the property now found in the possession of this man, who two years previously had lived from day to day on what he could pick up, was an additional proof against him if one were needed. However, M. Plantat was pretty well acquainted with Robelot's recent prosperity, and he did not find anything he had, so to say, been ignorant of before. He found the deeds of the Morin property and the Frapesle and Peyron lands; together with two promissory notes for 150 and 820 francs, signed by two inhabitants of Orcival in Robelot's favour. "Nothing of importance," whispered M. Plantat disconsolately in M. Lecoq's ear. "How do you explain that?"

"Why," replied the detective, "it's natural enough. Robelot was a sly rogue, quite cunning enough to conceal his sudden fortune and sufficiently patient to appear to be years in accumulating it. You will only find in his drawers such valuables as he might have owned possessing without danger. How much do those things represent altogether?"

"About 14,500 francs," rejoined Plantat, after a rapid calculation.

"Madame Sauvresy gave him more than that," said the detective. "If that were all he received, he would not have been such a fool as to invest it entirely in land. He must have a hoard of money concealed somewhere."

"Of course he must. But where?"

"Ah, let me look." So saying M. Lecoq began to rummage about, peering into every corner of the room, moving the furniture, testing the floor with his heels, and here and there rapping against the wall with his fist. At last he came to the fireplace, and paused. "Hum," said he. "We are in July and yet there are cinders in this fireplace."

"People sometimes neglect to clean them out in the spring."

"True, but these seem rather suspicious. They ought to be covered with light dust and soot if they had lain here several months, and I don't find any." Going into the outer room, where the men were waiting after completing their task, he asked one of them to fetch him a pickaxe. They all started off on the same errand, and Lecoq returned to his companion. Kneeling down and pushing the cinders aside, he laid the stones of the fireplace bare. Then taking a thin piece of wood, he easily inserted it into the cracks between the slabs. "Look here, M. Plantat," said he. "There is no cement between these stones, and they positively move; the treasure must be here."

Directly the pickaxe was brought, he wedged it into one of the cracks, and with a single wrench overturned the central stone. There was a

deep cavity underneath. "Ah," cried he triumphantly, "I knew it well enough."

The hiding place was filled with rouleaux of twenty-franc pieces, on counting which M. Lecoq arrived at a total of 19,500 francs. Lying besides the gold he discovered a slip of paper covered with figures; evidently some secret account which Robelot had kept. On the left hand a sum of 40,000 francs was set down, and on the right appeared numerous smaller ones, forming a total of 21,500 francs. This last was plainly money which Robelot had expended in purchases of land and otherwise. The 40,000 francs were the price of poor Sauvresy's life—the sum that Madame Sauvresy had paid for the vial of poison. There was now nothing more to learn at Robelot's house, so they locked the money up in a desk, affixed seals everywhere, and appointed two men to remain on guard.

Important as all these successive discoveries were, M. Lecoq was not yet quite satisfied. What was the manuscript Plantat had read from the night before? At first the detective had thought that it was simple a copy of the papers confided to him by Sauvresy; but that could not be the case, for Sauvresy could not possibly have thus described the last agonizing scenes of his life. This matter worried the detective and impaired the satisfaction he felt at having solved the Valfeuille mystery. Accordingly he determined to make one more attempt to surprise Plantat into satisfying his curiosity. Drawing him towards one of the windows, he assumed his most innocent air, and said, "I beg your pardon, but are we going back to your house?"

"Why should we? You know the doctor is going to meet us here."

"I think we may need the papers you read to us, so as to convince M. Domini."

M. Plantat smiled sadly, and looking steadfastly at the detective, replied, "You are very sly, M. Lecoq; but I am sly enough myself to keep the last key of the mystery of which you hold all the others."

"Believe me—" stammered M. Lecoq.

"I believe," interrupted his companion, "that you would very well like to know how I obtained my information. Your memory is too good for you to forget that, when I began last evening, I told you that this narrative was for your ear alone, and that I had only one object in reading it—to assist our search. Why should the investigating magistrate see these notes which are purely personal, and have no legal or authentic character?" He reflected for a moment and added: "I have sufficient confidence in you, M. Lecoq, and esteem you highly enough to feel sure you will not divulge what has been communicated to you in strict confidence. What you may say will be of as much weight as any thing I might reveal—especially now that you have Robelot's body to back your assertions, as well as the money found in his possession. If M. Domini still hesitates to believe you, you know that the doctor has promised to find traces of the poison which killed poor Sauvresy—" M. Plantat paused and hesitated. "In short," he resumed, "I think there will be no necessity for you to mention what you have heard from me."

M. Lecoq took him by the hand, and pressing it significantly, replied "Count on me, monsieur."

At this moment Doctor Gendron appeared at the door. "Courtois is better," said he. "He cries like a child; but he will come round again."

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Plantat. "Now, as you are here, we'll hurry

off to Corbeil ; M. Domini, who has been waiting for us all the morning, must be mad with impatience."

XXIII.

PAPA PLANTAT scarcely exaggerated when speaking in this fashion anent M. Domini's impatience, for the investigating magistrate was indeed truly furious. Donning his judicial robe, he had installed himself at an early hour in his official room at the court-house, expecting that Lecoq, Gendron, and Plantat would soon arrive. He could not possibly understand the cause of their delay, being more than ever convinced that the crime at Valfeuilu was a very simple affair—quite destitute of any mystery. He was annoyed that the others did not share his convictions, and he waited for their report with growing irritation as his clerk only too clearly perceived. He partook of breakfast in his judicial cabinet, so as not to miss his visitors, but the precaution was useless, for time passed on, and still no one arrived. To occupy himself he sent for Guespin and Bertaud, and questioned them afresh, without, however, learning anything more than he had been able to extract from them the night before. Bertaud swore by all things sacred that he knew nothing except what he had already told ; and Guespin obstinately clung to his original system, remarking, "I know I am lost ; do what you like with me."

At last at the very moment when M. Domini was on the point of despatching a mounted gendarme to Orcival to find out why the detective and his companions had not yet arrived, his messenger entered and announced that they were in the lobby. The magistrate's impatience was so great and his curiosity so keen, that quite unmindful of what he called his dignity, he rose from his seat and went to meet them at the door. "How late you are !" said he.

"And yet we haven't lost a minute," remarked M. Plantat. "We haven't even been to bed."

"There is news, then ? Has the count's body been found ?"

"There is news, indeed, monsieur," replied M. Lecoq. "But the count's body has not been found, and I may perhaps venture to say that it will not be found—for the simple reason that he has not been killed. Indeed, he was not one of the victims, as at first supposed, but the assassin."

At this formal declaration the magistrate started from his seat, which he had just resumed. "Why, that's madness !" cried he.

M. Lecoq never smiled in a magistrate's presence. "I don't think so," he coolly rejoined. "Indeed, I am persuaded that if M. Domini will grant me his attention for half an hour or so, I shall have the honour of convincing him that such is the fact." The magistrate slightly shrugged his shoulders, while Lecoq not in the least abashed calmly continued, "More than that. I am sure M. Domini will not allow me to leave this room without a warrant to arrest this Count Hector de Trémoré, whom at the present moment he believes is dead."

"Possibly," curtly rejoined the magistrate. "Proceed."

M. Lecoq then rapidly recapitulated the various items of circumstantial evidence which he and M. Plantat had collected together since the commencement of the inquiry. He did not say that he had been told anything, or that he had guessed anything, but each fact or circumstance was mentioned at the proper time and in the proper place, the story proceeding

in uninterrupted sequence. The detective had reassumed his haberdasher aspect and manner, speaking in a shrill piping voice, and constantly employing such obsequious expressions as, "I have the honour," and "If Monsieur Domini will deign to allow me." When he came to any striking point in his narrative, he resorted to his lozenge box as he had done the night before at Valfeuilu, and either swallowed a pastille or fondly contemplated the portrait of the dear departed. As he proceeded, M. Domini's surprise rapidly increased, and at intervals the magistrate ejaculated with astonishment: "Is it possible?" or, "That is hard to believe!" At length M. Lecoq finished his narrative; quietly munched a lozenge, and then inquired, "What is monsieur's opinion now?"

M. Domini was fain to confess that he was almost satisfied, but although the evidence was so abundant and positive he was scarcely the man to give up a preconceived opinion without a struggle. Still, he condescended to reply, "I am convinced a crime was committed on M. Sauvresy with the assistance of that man Robelot. To-morrow I shall give instructions to Dr. Gendron to have M. Sauvresy's body exhumed and examined."

"And you may be quite sure I shall find the poison," chimed in the doctor.

"Very well," resumed M. Domini. "But although M. de Trémoré may have poisoned his friend to marry his widow, does it necessarily follow that he killed his wife yesterday and then fled? I don't think so."

"Excuse me," objected Lecoq; "but to my mind there is some evidence in Mademoiselle Courtois's supposed suicide."

"That certainly needs clearing up, but, after all, the coincidence can only be a matter of chance."

"But I am sure that M. Trémoré shaved himself, indeed we have proof of it, and besides we did not find the boots which, according to his valet, he was wearing on the morning of the murder."

"Softly, softly," interrupted the magistrate. "I don't pretend that you are absolutely wrong; it may be as you say; only I state the objections your theory may be met by. However, let us admit that Trémoré killed his wife, that he fled, and is alive. Does that clear Guespin, and prove that he took no part in the murder?"

This was evidently the flaw in Lecoq's case; but being convinced of Hector's guilt, he had given little heed to the poor gardener, thinking that his innocence would be sufficiently demonstrated when the real criminal was arrested. He was about to reply, when a sound of footsteps was heard in the passage outside. "Stop," said M. Domini, "we shall no doubt hear something important about Guespin now."

"Are you expecting some new witness?" asked M. Plantat.

"No; I expect a Corbeil police agent whom I entrusted with an important mission."

"Respecting Guespin?"

"Yes. Early this morning a young work-girl of the town, whom Guespin has been courting, brought me an excellent photograph of him. I gave this portrait to the agent with instructions to go to the establishment in Paris called 'Vulcan's Forges,' and ascertain if Guespin had been seen there, and whether he bought any thing there the night before last."

M. Lecoq felt jealous; and could not forbear remarking with an expressive grimace: "I am truly grieved that Monsieur Domini has so little confidence in me that he thinks I ought to be assisted."

"Eh! my good fellow," retorted the magistrate, "you can't be every-

where at once. I think you very shrewd, but you were not here, and I was in a hurry."

"A false step is often irreparable."

"Make yourself easy; I sent an intelligent man."

At this moment the door opened, and the police agent referred to appeared on the threshold. He was a muscular man of forty or thereabout, with a military bearing, heavy moustaches and thick eye-brows, which met over his nose. The expression of his features was sly rather than shrewd, and would have alone sufficed to awaken suspicion and place people on their guard. "Good news!" said he in a deep voice. "I didn't journey to Paris for nothing; we are quite right about that rogue Guespin."

M. Domini encouraged his emissary with an approving gesture. "Look here, Goulard," said he, "let us proceed in order if we can. You went according to my instructions, to 'Vulcan's Forges?'"

"At once, monsieur."

"Precisely. Had they seen the prisoner there?"

"Yes; on the evening of Wednesday, 8th July."

"What o'clock was it?"

"About ten o'clock, a few minutes before they shut up; so that he was the more distinctly noticed."

"And who recognised the photograph?"

"Three of the shopmen. Guespin's manner first attracted their attention, for he seemed to be half drunk; and besides he talked a great deal and said he would patronize them. He declared that if they would make a reduction in their prices he could procure them the custom of an establishment called the 'Gentil Jardinier,' which bought a great many gardening tools, and the manager of which had every confidence in him."

M. Domini turned to consult some papers which were lying before him on his desk. He found by his notes that it was this same establishment, the "Gentil Jardinier" that had procured Guespin his situation at Valfenillu. After recording this fact he added, "The question of identity seems settled. Guespin was undoubtedly at 'Vulcan's Forges' on Wednesday night."

"So much the better for him," muttered M. Lecocq, unable to control himself.

Although the magistrate heard the remark and thought it somewhat singular he did not turn aside to discuss it, but continued questioning his agent. "Well, did they tell you what Guespin went there to buy?"

"Yes, the shopmen recollected it perfectly. He first bought a hammer, a chisel, and a file."

"I knew it," exclaimed M. Domini. "And then?"

"Then—" Here the agent, ambitious to create a sensation among his audience, rolled his eyes tragically, and added in a dramatic tone, "Then he bought a dirk knife!"

The magistrate considered that he was triumphing over M. Lecocq. "Well," said he to the detective in an ironical tone, "what do you think of your friend Guespin now? What do you think of this honest and worthy young man, who, on the very night of the crime, leaves a wedding-party with which he might have enjoyed himself, to go and buy a hammer, a chisel, and a dirk—everything, in short, that was used in perpetrating the murder and in mutilating the body?"

Doctor Gendron seemed somewhat disconcerted by these remarks, but a sly smile stole over M. Plantat's face. As for M. Lecocq, he had the air of a man who meets with objections which he knows he ought to annihilate

with one word, but who, as his subordinate position renders this impossible, is constrained to allow time to be wasted in useless talk when it might be employed to great profit. "I think, monsieur," said he, as humbly as possible, "that the murderers at Valfeuillu did not use a hammer or a chisel, or a file, and that they brought no instrument at all from outside—"

"What, didn't they use a dirk?" asked the magistrate in a bantering tone. He felt confident that he was on the right path.

"That is another question, I confess; but it is a difficult one to answer," rejoined Lecoq, who was beginning to lose patience. And turning towards the Corbeil police-agent, he abruptly asked him, "Is that all you know?"

The tall fellow with the thick eyebrows glanced superciliously at the little Parisian who dared to question him in this fashion. He hesitated so long that M. Lecoq repeated his question, more roughly than before.

"Yes, that's all," said Goulard at last, "and I think it's sufficient; the magistrate thinks so too; and he is the only person who gives me orders, and whose approbation I wish for."

M. Lecoq shrugged his shoulders, and proceeded, "Let's see; did you ask what was the shape and size of the dirk which Guespin bought? Was it long or short, wide or narrow?"

"Faith, no. What was the use?"

"Simply, my fine fellow, to compare the dimensions of the weapon with the victim's wounds, and to ascertain whether the shape of its handle would correspond with the mark left between the victim's shoulders."

"I forgot it; but it is easily remedied."

"An oversight may, of course, be forgiven; but you can at least tell us in what sort of money Guespin paid for his purchases?"

The Corbeil agent seemed so embarrassed, humiliated, and vexed, that the magistrate hastened to his assistance. "The money is of little consequence, it seems to me," said he.

"I beg you to excuse me if I don't agree with you," rejoined M. Lecoq.

"This matter may be very important; for what is the most serious evidence against Guespin? The money found in his pocket. Now, suppose for a moment that he changed a 1,000 franc-note in Paris at ten o'clock the night before last. In that case the money could not have been derived from the crime at Valfeuillu, for at that hour the crime had not yet been committed. Where could it have come from? That is no concern of mine, at present. But if my view is correct, the hundred and odd francs found in Guespin's possession can only be the change out of that note."

"That's only a theory," urged M. Domini in an irritated tone.

"That's true; but one which may turn out a certainty. It remains for me to ask this man how Guespin carried away the things he bought? Did he simply slip them into his pocket, or did he have them done up in a parcel, and, if so, how?"

The detective spoke in a sharp tone, tinged with bitter raillery, and frightened his Corbeil colleague out of all his remaining assurance. "I don't know," stammered the unfortunate agent. "They didn't tell me—I thought—"

M. Lecoq raised his hands as if to call heaven to witness his *confrère's* stupidity. He was inwardly delighted to have such an excellent opportunity to revenge himself for M. Domini's disdain. He could not, of course, presume to say anything to the magistrate; but he had the right to ridicule his emissary. "Ah so, my lad," said he, "then what did you go to Paris for? To show Guespin's portrait and relate the crime to the people at

'Vulcan's Forges?' They ought to be very grateful to you; but Madame Petit, M. Plantat's housekeeper, would have done as much."

The Corbeil agent was now fairly roused. He could not allow himself to be bantered in this fashion. He frowned, and angrily responded, "Look here, now, you—"

"Ta, ta, ta," interrupted the detective. "Just know who's talking to you. I am M. Lecoq."

The effect of this name, famous throughout the force, was magical. The Corbeil champion laid down his arms and surrendered. He felt almost flattered to have been so roughly handled by such a celebrity. "Is it possible? You, M. Lecoq!" he muttered in a tone of respectful admiration.

"Yes, it is I, young man; but console yourself; I bear no grudge against you. You don't know your profession, but you have done me a service, and you have brought us a convincing proof of Guespin's innocence."

M. Domini witnessed this scene with secret chagrin. His recruit had gone over to the enemy, yielding without a struggle to his antagonist's admitted superiority. However, the magistrate was exasperated by Lecoq's presumption, in proclaiming the innocence of a prisoner whom he (Domini) still considered guilty. "And what is this tremendous proof, if you please?" asked he.

"It is simple and striking," answered M. Lecoq, assuming his most frivolous air as his conclusions narrowed the field of probabilities. "You no doubt recollect that when we were at Valfeuilu we found the hands of the clock in the bedroom pointing to twenty minutes past three. Suspecting a dodge, I set the striking apparatus in motion—as you will recollect. What happened? The clock struck eleven. That convinced us that the crime was committed before that hour. Now, if Guespin was at 'Vulcan's Forges' at ten he could not have got back to Valfeuilu before midnight. Therefore it was not he who perpetrated the crime." The detective, as he came to this conclusion, pulled out the inevitable box and helped himself to a lozenge, at the same time giving the magistrate a glance which clearly implied, "Get out of that, if you can."

If M. Lecoq's deductions were correct—and they indeed seemed unanswerable—nothing remained of the magistrate's theory. However, M. Domini could not yet admit that he had been so thoroughly deceived; he could not renounce an opinion he had formed after deliberate reflection. "I don't pretend that Guespin is the only criminal," said he. "He could only have been an accomplice; and he certainly was one."

"An accomplice? No, monsieur, he was a victim. Ah, Trémoré is a great scoundrel! Don't you now realise why he put the clock on? At first I didn't quite discern his object in making it appear as if the murder had been committed five hours after it was really accomplished; but now that point is clear. In order to implicate Guespin, it must seem as if the crime had been committed after midnight, and—" M. Lecoq abruptly paused, and remained with open mouth and fixed eyes as a new idea flashed through his mind.

This circumstance was unnoticed by M. Domini, who was bending over his papers trying to find some note that might enable him to sustain his argument. "How do you explain Guespin's refusal to speak and give us an account of where he spent the night?" he asked.

M. Lecoq had now recovered himself, and Dr. Gendron and M. Plantat, who were watching him with the closest attention, noticed a triumphant gleam in his eyes. No doubt he had solved the remaining point of the

mystery. "I can understand Guespin's obstinate silence," he replied, "and explain it. I should be amazed if he decided to speak even now."

M. Domini misconstrued the detective's meaning, and fancied that his words were only so much covert banter. "Guespin has had a night's reflection," he remarked. "Aren't twelve hours enough to concoct a system of defence?"

The detective shook his head doubtfully. "No," said he, "it's not that. I am positive our prisoner doesn't trouble himself about a system of defence."

"But if he doesn't speak," urged M. Domini, "it can only be because he hasn't been able to concoct a plausible story."

"No, no; believe me, he isn't trying to concoct one. In my opinion, Guespin is a victim; that is, I suspect Trémoré of having set an infamous trap for him. He has fallen into it, and considers himself so utterly lost that it would be useless for him to struggle. The poor devil is convinced that resistance would only tighten the net that imprisons him.

"I think so, too," observed M. Plantat, and encouraged by this approval Lecoq continued. "The real criminal, Count Hector, lost his presence of mind at the last moment, and thus compromised all the advantages which his previous caution might have gained for him. Don't let us forget that he is an able man, utterly unscrupulous, and endowed with considerable cunning. He knows that the law must have a culprit for every crime; and he realises that so long as no culprit is forthcoming, the police remains on the watch and steadily prosecutes its search. So he has thrown us Guespin, just like a huntsman, closely pressed, might throw his glove to the bear that is close upon him. Perhaps he thought that Guespin would not be in danger of his life; at all events he hoped to gain time by this ruse. To return to my simile, while the bear is smelling and pawing the glove, the huntsman gains ground, escapes, and reaches a place of refuge; that was what Trémoré proposed to do."

The Corbeil police-agent was now undoubtedly Lecoq's most enthusiastic listener. Goulard literally drank in his superior's words. He had never heard any of his colleagues express themselves with such fervour and authority, and as he noticed Papa Plantat's and Dr. Gendron's admiring glances, he drew himself up more erect as if he could lay some personal claim to a share in Lecoq's success. He grew in his own esteem as he thought that he served in an army commanded by such generals, and no longer held any other opinion than that which his superior expressed. However, it was by no means so easy for M. Lecoq to convince and subjugate the examining magistrate. "There may be some plausibility in what you say," observed the latter, "but you saw Guespin's countenance?"

"Ah, what does that prove? Suppose you and I were arrested to-morrow on a terrible charge, what would our bearing be?" M. Domini gave a significant start; the supposition scarcely pleased him. "And yet you and I are familiar with the machinery of justice. When I arrested Lanscot, the servant in the Rue Marignan, his first words were, 'Come on, my account is settled.' When Papa Tabaret and I apprehended the Viscount de Commarin as he was getting out of bed on the charge of murdering the Widow Lerouge, he cried, 'I am lost.' And yet neither of them were guilty. Both the viscount and the valet, however, feared a possible miscarriage of justice, and seeing no means of disproving the charges against them, gave way to overwhelming discouragement."

"But such discouragement does not last two days," said M. Domini.

M. Lecoq did not answer this remark, but proceeded with increasing

animation. "You and I have seen enough prisoners to know how deceitful appearances are, and how little they are to be trusted. It would be foolish to base a theory upon a prisoner's bearing. The men who talk about 'the cry of innocence' are as great idiots as those who prate concerning 'the pale stupor' of guilt. Unfortunately neither crime nor virtue have any especial countenance. The Simon girl, who was accused of having killed her father, absolutely refused to answer any questions for twenty-two days; but on the twenty-third, the real murderer was caught. As for the Sylvain affair—"

M. Domini rapped lightly on his desk to check the detective. As a man, he was wont to cling far too obstinately to his opinions; as a magistrate, he was almost equally obstinate, but at the same time he was ready to sacrifice his self-love should duty require it. M. Lecq's arguments had scarcely shaken his convictions, but they required immediate examination and refutation, or else he must acknowledge himself conquered. "You seem to be pleading," said he to the detective. "There is no need of that here. We are not counsel and judge; we both have the same honourable intentions. Each, in his sphere, is searching for the truth. You think you see it shining where I can only discern clouds; and you may be mistaken as well as I." Then with perfect heroism, he condescended to add, "What do you think I ought to do?"

M. Domini was at least rewarded for this effort by the approving glances of M. Plantat and the doctor. M. Lecq, however, did not hasten to reply; following up his earlier remarks he had many weighty reasons to advance, but he realised that argument would be out of place; he must present some fact, some positive, tangible proof. How could he accomplish such a feat? He strove to think of an expedient. "Well?" insisted M. Domini.

"Ah," cried the detective. "Why can't I ask Guespin two or three questions?"

M. Domini frowned, for the suggestion seemed to him rather presumptuous. It is formally laid down that prisoners should only be questioned by the examining magistrate, assisted by his clerk; but, on the other hand, after they have once been interrogated, they may be confronted with witnesses. There are, besides, exceptions in favour of the members of the police force. M. Domini reflected whether there were any precedents to apply to the case. "I don't know," he eventually answered, "how far the law allows me to consent to what you ask. However, as I am convinced that the interests of truth outweigh all rules, I will take it on myself to let you question Guespin." He rang his bell, and having ascertained that Guespin was still under guard at the court-house, ordered him to be brought in immediately.

M. Lecq was radiant; he had not hoped to achieve such a victory over a magistrate so jealous of his privileges as M. Domini. "Guespin will speak now," said he, confidently, "for I have three means of unloosening his tongue, one of which is sure to succeed. But before he comes I should like to learn one thing. Do you know whether Trémoré ever saw Jenny after Sauvresy's death?"

"Jenny?" ejaculated M. Plantat, a little surprised, and recovering himself, he added, "Yes, he saw her pretty often. After the scene at the Belle Image, she plunged into dissipation. I don't know whether she was smitten with remorse, whether she realised that it was her conduct which had killed Sauvresy, or whether she suspected his having been poisoned, but at all events she took to drink and pestered the count out of his life. He seemed

terribly afraid of her. When she had spent all her money she sent to him for more, and he gave her some. On one occasion he refused; but the same evening she went to him in a state of intoxication, and he had the greatest difficulty in the world to get rid of her. In short, she knew about his relations with Madame Sauvresy, and she threatened to cause a scandal. It was a regular case of levying black-mail. He told me all about the trouble she gave him, and added that he should not be able to get rid of her without having her shut up, which he could not bring himself to do."

"Do you know when they last met?"

"Why, not three weeks ago," answered the doctor. "I had gone to Melun to attend a consultation, and I saw the count and this girl at a hotel window; when he perceived me he suddenly drew back."

"Then," said the detective, "there's no longer any doubt."

At that moment Guespin, looking very pale and haggard, entered the room escorted by two gendarmes. "Let us see," said the magistrate. "Have you changed your mind about speaking?" The prisoner did not answer. "Have you decided to tell us about yourself?"

Guespin quivered with suppressed rage and hoarsely replied: "Speak! Why should I?" Then with the gesture of a man abandoning himself to fate, he added, "What have I done to you, my God, for you to torture me like this? What do you want me to say? That I committed the crime—is that what you want? Well, then—yes—I was the murderer. Now, you're satisfied, so cut my head off, and do it quick—for I don't want to suffer any longer."

A solemn pause followed this unexpected declaration. What! he confessed his guilt! M. Domini had at least the good taste not to exult; indeed he seemed extremely surprised by this sudden avowal. The detective also was astonished, but he succeeded in retaining his presence of mind. Approaching Guespin and tapping him on the shoulder he exclaimed in a paternal tone, "Come, comrade, what you are telling us is absurd. Do you think the magistrate has any secret grudge against you? No, eh? Do you suppose I want to have you guillotined? Not at all. A crime has been committed, and we are trying to find the murderer. If you are innocent, help us to find the man who isn't. What were you doing from Wednesday evening till Thursday morning."

But Guespin persisted in his foolish obstinacy. "I've said what I have to say," replied he.

M. Lecoq changed his tone to one of severity, stepping back to note the effect he was about to produce on Guespin. "You haven't any right to hold your tongue. And even if you do, you fool, the police know everything. Your master sent you on an errand, didn't he, on Wednesday night; what did he give you? A thousand franc note?"

The prisoner looked at M. Lecoq in amazement. "No," he stammered, "it was a five hundred franc note."

The detective, like all great artists in a critical scene, was really moved. His surprising genius for investigation had just determined him to venture on a bold stroke, which, if successful, meant absolute victory. "Now," said he, "tell me the woman's name."

"I don't know."

"You are only a fool then. She's rather short, isn't she, but very pretty, with dark hair, a pale face, and big eyes?"

"You know her then?" said Guespin, in a trembling voice.

"Yes, comrade, and if you want to know her name, to mention it in your prayers, I'll tell you that she's called—Jenny."

Really able men never wantonly parade their superiority; they are content to know that it is recognised. Accordingly, M. Lecoq quietly enjoyed his triumph, while his hearers wondered at his perspicacity. A rapid chain of reasoning had enabled him to realize not only the nature of Trémoré's thoughts, but also the means he had employed to accomplish his purpose.

Guespin, in the meanwhile, was asking himself how this man could be acquainted with things which he had every reason to believe were secret. "Since I have told you the woman's name," continued Lecoq, "tell me why the count gave you a five hundred-franc note."

"It was just as I was going out. He had no small coin, and did not want to send me to Orcival for change. I was to bring him back what I didn't spend."

"And why didn't you join your companions at the wedding at Batignolles?" No answer.

"Come, what errand did the count send you on?"

Guespin hesitated. It occurred to him that the other witnesses of the scene were eyeing him ironically, and he conjectured he had fallen into some snare they had set for him. "Ah," cried he in a despairing tone, "you have deceived me. You have been telling me lies so as to find out the truth. I have been fool enough to answer you, and now you are going to turn it all against me."

"What? Are you going to talk nonsense again?" asked Lecoq.

"No; but I see your game, and you won't catch me again! Now I'd rather die than say a word." The detective tried to reassure him; but he added, "No, no; I'm as sly as you are; I've told you nothing but lies."

This sudden whim surprised no one. Some prisoners entrench themselves behind a system of defence, to which they cling with sheer obstinacy, while others vary with each fresh question, denying what they have just affirmed, and constantly inventing some new absurdity which later on is rejected in its turn. M. Lecoq fruitlessly tried to draw Guespin from his silence, and M. Domini made the same attempt with no effect—to all their questions he would only answer, "I don't know."

At last the detective waxed impatient. "Look here," said he to Guespin, "I took you for a young man of sense, and I find you are only a fool. Do you imagine we don't know any thing! Listen. On the night of Madame Denis's wedding, you were getting ready to go off with your comrades, and had just borrowed twenty francs from the valet, when the count called you. He told you to leave the other servants at the station in Paris and go to 'Vulcan's Forges,' where you were to buy him a hammer, a file, a chisel, and a dirk. You were to carry these things to a certain woman named Jenny, and the count made you promise that you would keep the errand a perfect secret. To do you justice, you certainly kept the promise. To buy these things the count gave you this famous five hundred franc note, telling you to bring him back the change when you returned next day. Isn't that so?" The prisoner's eyes glistened affirmatively enough; but his tongue still answered, "I don't know." "Now," pursued M. Lecoq, "I'm going to tell you what happened afterwards. You drank a good deal and got tipsy, and in short spent more than half the change out of the note. That explains your fright when you were arrested yesterday morning before any body said a word to you. You thought you were being arrested for spending that money. Then, when you learnt that the count had been murdered, you recollected that you had bought all kinds of im-

plements useful for theft and murder on the evening before; and you didn't know either the address or the name of the woman whom you gave the package to. Besides, you felt sure that you wouldn't be believed if you explained how you came by the money found in your pocket, and so, instead of thinking of some means of proving your innocence, you grew afraid, and thought you might perhaps save yourself by holding your tongue."

The prisoner's expression visibly changed; the muscles of his face relaxed, and his lips parted; hope no doubt was dawning in his mind. However, he still resisted. "Do what you like with me," said he.

"Eh! What should we do with such a fool as you?" cried M. Lecoq angrily. "I begin to think you are a rascal too. A decent fellow would see that we want to get him out of a scrape, and he'd tell us the truth. You are prolonging your imprisonment by your own obstinacy; but you'd better learn that the best policy consists in telling the truth. A last time, will you answer?" Guespin shook his head; no. "Go back to prison, then, since it pleases you," concluded the detective; and glancing at M. Domini for his approval, he added, "Gendarmes, remove the prisoner."

The investigating magistrate's last doubts were dispelled; and to tell the truth he sincerely regretted having treated the detective so curtly. However, he tried to make amends as well as he could. "You are an able man, M. Lecoq," said he. "Without speaking of your penetration, which seems almost like second sight, the way you just examined Guespin was most masterly. Accept my congratulations, to say nothing of the reward for which I propose recommending you to your superiors."

The detective received these compliments with an air of virgin modesty. He glanced tenderly at the dear defunct's portrait, and no doubt said to it, "At last, darling, we have defeated him—this austere magistrate, who so heartily detests the force of which we are the brightest ornament! He apologises and recognises our services." Then raising his eyes he answered aloud: "I can only accept half your praise, monsieur; permit me to offer the remainder to my friend, M. Plantat."

The latter tried to protest. "Oh," said he, "I only gave you a few bits of information! You would have ferreted out the truth without me just the same."

The magistrate rose and graciously, though not without an inward struggle, offered M. Lecoq his hand. "You have spared me a great remorse," said he. "Guespin's innocence would sooner or later have been surely recognised; but the idea of having imprisoned an innocent man and harassed him with interrogatories would have disturbed my sleep and worried my mind for a long time."

"Heaven knows this Guespin is not an interesting youth," rejoined the detective. "I should be disposed to press him hard if I were not certain he's half a fool."

M. Domini started. "I shall discharge him this very day," said he, "this very hour."

"It will be an act of charity," remarked M. Lecoq; "but confound his obstinacy! it was so easy for him to simplify my task. I might be able to divine the principal facts—the errand, and a woman being mixed up in the affair; but it would require a magician to master all the particulars. Now, what part has Jenny been playing? Has she been a willing accomplice or an ignorant instrument just like Guespin? Where did she meet Guespin and where did she take him? It seems to me she must have made him

drunk so as to prevent his going to Batignolles. Trémorol must have told her some false story; but what was it?"

"I don't think Trémorol troubled his head about so small a matter," said M. Plantat. "He gave Guespin and Jenny some task, without explaining it at all."

M. Lecoq reflected a moment. "Perhaps you are right. But Jenny must have had special orders to prevent Guespin from putting in an *alibi*."

"However," remarked M. Domini, "this girl Jenny will explain it all to us."

"That is what I rely on," answered Lecoq, "and within forty-eight hours from now I hope to have found her and brought her safely to Corbeil." He rose as he spoke, took his cane and hat, and turning to the magistrate, added, "Before retiring—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted M. Domini, "you want a warrant to arrest Hector de Trémorol."

"I do, as you are now of my opinion that he is still alive."

"I am sure of it," rejoined M. Domini; who opened his portfolio and filled up the following warrant: "By the law, We, Examining Magistrate of the Tribunal of Corbeil, in virtue of Articles 91 and 94 of the Code of Criminal Investigation, hereby command all agents and officers of the police to arrest in conformity with the law, one Hector de Trémorol, etc."

When he had finished, he handed the document to the detective, who then took leave and retired, followed by M. Plantat. The doctor remained with M. Domini to make arrangements for Sauvresy's exhumation.

M. Lecoq was just crossing the threshold of the court-house when he felt himself touched on the arm. He turned and found Goulard, the Corbeil police agent, who was very anxious to accompany his superior, being persuaded that after serving under so great a captain he must inevitably become a famous man himself. M. Lecoq had some difficulty in getting rid of his colleague, but he at length found himself alone in the street with Papa Plantat. "It is late," said the latter. "So wont you partake of another modest dinner with me, and accept my cordial hospitality?"

"I am sorry to be obliged to refuse you," replied M. Lecoq. "But I ought to be in Paris this evening."

"But I—in fact, I—was very anxious to talk to you—about—"

"About Mademoiselle Laurence?"

"Yes; I have a plan, and if you would help me—"

M. Lecoq cordially pressed his companion's hand. "I have only known you a few hours," said he, "and yet I am as anxious to assist you as I should be with an old friend. I will certainly do everything that is humanly possible to serve you."

"But where shall I see you? They expect me to-day at Orcival."

"Very well; come to-morrow morning at nine o'clock to my rooms, No — Rue Montmartre."

"Many thanks; I shall be there."

They walked on as far as the "Belle Image," and then separated.

XXIV.

NINE o'clock had just struck at the church of St. Eustache, when M. Plantat reached the Rue Montmartre, and entered the house to which the detective had directed him. "M. Lecoq?" asked he of an old woman whom he

found in the porter's lodge, busy getting breakfast for three fat cats which were mewing round her. The old woman scanned the new comer with mingled surprise and suspicion. M. Plantat, when he appeared in full dress, looked more like an elderly nobleman than a country magistrate; and though the detective received visits from all sorts of people he was seldom asked after by folks from the Faubourg Saint Germain. "M. Lecoq's apartments," replied the old woman at last, "are on the third floor; ring at the door facing the stairs."

Papa Plantat slowly climbed the narrow, ill-lighted staircase, which in certain dark corners was almost dangerous. He was thinking of the strange step he was about to take. An idea had occurred to him, but he did not know if it were practicable, and at all events he needed the detective's assistance and advice. He would have to disclose his most secret thoughts—to confess himself as it were—and his heart beat fast. The door opposite the staircase on the third floor was not like those he had seen below; it was of stout plain oak without any mouldings, but strengthened by formidable iron bars. One would have taken it for a prison door had it not been decorated with a heavily-coloured design representing a cock crowing, the legend, "Always Vigilant," running underneath. Had the detective affixed this coat of arms or had it been placed there by one of his men? After examining the door for some little time, and hesitating like a youthful swain at his sweetheart's wicket, Papa Plantat at last ventured to ring the bell. In response came the sound of keys turning in multitudinous locks, but at last a little peep-hole opened, and M. Plantat espied the hairy face of an old crone—who asked him, in a deep bass voice, what he wanted.

"M. Lecoq."

"What do you want with him?"

"He made an appointment with me for this morning."

"Your name and business?"

"M. Plantat, magistrate at Orcival."

"All right. Wait."

The peephole closed and Papa Plantat did as he was bid. "H'm," growled he. "It seems every one isn't allowed in here."

Hardly had this reflection crossed his mind when the door opened with a noise of chains and locks. He walked in and after passing through a dining-room scantily furnished with a table and six chairs, he was ushered by the same old crone into a larger apartment which apparently did joint duty as a dressing and a work-room, and which was lighted by two windows faced by strong close iron bars, and looking into a courtyard. "If you will take the trouble to sit down," said the servant, "M. Lecoq will soon be here: he is giving orders to one of his men."

But M. Plantat did not take a seat; he preferred to examine the singular chamber in which he found himself. All along one of the walls hung multitudinous articles of wearing apparel—clothes of every cut, shade, and texture, suited in turn to every different class of society. There was one row of pegs for all kinds of hats and caps and another for wigs of every tint and character; boots and shoes of various styles being ranged on the floor below. A toilet-table, covered with powders, essences, and paints, stood between the fireplace and one of the windows; the other side of the room being taken up by a bookcase full of scientific works, mainly treating of chemistry and physics. But what most attracted M. Plantat's notice was a large black velvet cushion of lozenge shape, hanging beside the looking-glass. Pins had been pricked into it so as to form the letters of these two

names, HECTOR—JENNY, which stood out in bright relief against the sable background. This pin-cushion, thought Papa Plantat, must be M. Lecoq's reminder—intended to keep him in constant thought of the people he had to find. Many names, no doubt, had in turn glittered on that velvet, for the cushion was greatly frayed and perforated. An unfinished letter lay open on a writing-table hard by, and M. Plantat, with indiscreet curiosity, leaned forward to read it; but his inquisitiveness was not to be satisfied, for the missive was written in cipher.

He had scarcely finished inspecting the room when a door communicating with an inner apartment opened, and he found himself confronted by a respectable-looking man of his own age, slightly bald, and wearing gold spectacles and a light-coloured flannel dressing-gown. M. Plantat bowed, and remarked, "I am waiting here for M. Lecoq—"

The man with the gold spectacles burst into a laugh, and gleefully clapped his hands. "What! my dear sir," said he, "don't you know me? Look at me well—it is I—M. Lecoq!" And to convince his listener he took off his spectacles.

Yes, those might indeed be Lecoq's eyes, and that his voice; nevertheless, M. Plantat was confounded. "I never should have recognized you," said he.

"It's true, I have changed a little, but then I have to do so." And motioning his visitor to sit down, the detective added, "I must apologize for having made you undergo such formalities before you were let in; but I am compelled to treat everyone alike. I told you before about all the dangers I'm exposed to. Those rascals pursue me to my very door. Only last week a railway porter came here with a package addressed to me. Janouille—my old woman—suspected nothing, though she has a sharp scent, and told the man to come in. He held out the package, I approached to take it, and pif! paf! a couple of bullets whizzed past my ears. The package was a revolver wrapped up in oilcloth, and the porter was a convict, escaped from Cayenne, whom I had caught last year. Ah, I've had him properly secured now." Lecoq related this adventure as carelessly as if it had been the most natural occurrence in the world. "However we needn't starve," he added, sharply ringing the bell. And when the old woman appeared in answer to the summons, he ordered her to serve breakfast, and not to forget some good wine. "You are observing my Janouille," remarked he, seeing that M. Plantat glanced inquisitively at the servant. "She's unique, my dear friend; she watches over me as if I were her child, and she'd go through fire and water for me without a moment's notice. I had a good deal of trouble the other day to prevent her strangling that spurious porter. I picked her out of three or four thousand convicts, for years ago she was convicted of infanticide and arson. I would bet a hundred to one that, during the three years she has been in my service, she has not even thought of robbing me of a single centime."

However, M. Plantat only listened with one ear; he was thinking for an excuse to cut Janouille's story short, and turn the conversation to the crime at Valfeuilu. "I have, perhaps, disturbed you this morning, M. Lecoq?" said he.

"Me? then you did not see my motto—'always vigilant?' Why, I've been out ten times this morning, besides allotting work to three of my men. Ah, we have little time to ourselves, I can tell you. I went to 'Vulcan's Forges' to see what news I could get of that poor devil Guespin."

"And what did you hear?"

"That I had guessed right. He changed a five-hundred-franc note there at a quarter to ten o'clock last Wednesday evening.

"That is to say, he is saved?"

"Well, one may say so; at all events, he will be as soon as we have found that girl Jenny."

"But that will, perhaps, be long and difficult?" remarked Papa Plantat uneasily.

"Why so? She's on my black ball there—and barring accidents we shall have her before night."

"You really think so?"

"I should say I was sure to anybody but you. Just remember that this girl has been connected with the Count de Trémoré, a man of the world, a prince of fashion. When a girl falls into the gutter, after having, as they say, dazzled all Paris for six months with her luxury, she does not entirely disappear, like a stone in the mud. Even when she has lost all her friends, there are her creditors, who follow and watch her, waiting to see if fortune will smile on her once more. She doesn't trouble herself about them, she thinks they've forgotten her; but that's a mistake! I know a milliner whose memory's a perfect dictionary of the *demi-monde*; she has often done me a good turn. We will go and see her, if you like, after breakfast; and in a couple of hours we shall have Jenny's address. Ah, if I were only as sure of catching Trémoré!"

M. Plantat gave a sigh of relief. The conversation was at last taking the turn he wished. "You were thinking of him, then?" he asked.

"Thinking of him! exclaimed M. Lecoq, starting to his feet. "Now, just look at my black ball there. I haven't hardly thought of anybody else, since yesterday; I haven't had a wink of sleep all night through thinking of him. I must have him, and I will!"

"I don't doubt it; but when?"

"Ah, that's the point! Perhaps to-morrow, perhaps in a month's time; everything depends on the accuracy of my calculations, and the skill with which my plan is carried out."

"Ah, you have formed a plan?" exclaimed M. Plantat, becoming all attention.

"Yes, I start on the principle that it is impossible for a man, accompanied by a woman, to hide himself effectually. In the present case, the woman, is young, pretty, and in a noticeable condition; three impossibilities more. Let us admit this principle and study Hector's character. He isn't a man of unapproachable shrewdness, for we have found out all his dodges; but he isn't a fool either, for his dodges deceived folks who are by no means fools. He is therefore a man of the medium class, and his education, reading, relations, and daily conversation have given him certain knowledge and ideas which he will try to utilize. We know how weak his character is, how pliable and vacillating, and how he only acts at the last extremity. We have seen him always shrinking from any decisive steps, and invariably trying to procrastinate; he is apt to be deceived by his own illusions, and takes his wishes for accomplished facts. In short, he is morally a coward. Well, what is his situation? He has killed his wife; he hopes he has created a belief in his own death; he has eloped with a young girl, and he has got nearly or quite a million francs in his pocket. Now, this position admitted, as well as the man's character and mind, can we, by a series of logical deductions, and with such knowledge of his antecedents as we possess—can we, I say, determine how he in-

tended to act after leaving Orcival? I think we can, as I hope to prove to you." M. Lecoq paused, and paced for a moment up and down the room—"Now, let's see," he continued. "In order to determine the probable conduct of a man whose antecedents and character are known to me, I must fancy myself in his position. Of course I know very well what I should do if I were Trémorél. I should take such measures as would throw all the detectives in the universe off the scent. But I must forget my own character and knowledge and become Hector de Trémorél, such as he is. How would a man reason who was base enough to rob his friend of his wife, and allowed her to poison her husband before his very eyes? We already know that Trémorél hesitated some time before deciding to commit this crime. He was urged on by the logic of events, which fools call fatality. It is certain that he considered this murder from every point of view, studied its consequences, and sought for a plan which would enable him to escape punishment. The crime was deliberately premeditated, and he carefully weighed the chances in his favour and those against him. He must have said to himself—'I will suppose Bertha to be dead; thanks to my precautions, it is thought that I have been killed as well; Laurence, with whom I elope, writes a letter in which she announces her suicide; I have plenty of money, now, what shall I do?' I think the problem is fairly put like that."

"Quite so," replied M. Plantat.

"Well now, Trémorél would naturally choose the most effectual method of flight and concealment he could think of, or that he had ever heard or read about. Did he originally meditate leaving the country? No doubt he did; only, as he was not quite out of his senses, he realized that it was most difficult to avoid observation abroad. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is absurd for a man to try and escape punishment by flying from France; and this is especially the case when he is accompanied by a woman. Fancy a man and woman wandering about a country the language of which they can't speak; why, they attract attention at once; they are noticed, talked about, and followed. Every purchase they make is remarked; every movement they venture on excites curiosity, and the further they go the greater their danger. If they decide to cross the ocean to America, they must take passage on board a ship; and the moment they do that, they may be considered as good as lost. On landing, across the Atlantic, it is twenty to one they would be met by a detective, provided with a warrant to arrest them. As for London, I would undertake to find a Frenchman there within a week, unless his English was so perfect that he might pass for a citizen of the United Kingdom. Trémorél must have realized all this; he must have recollected reading of many such surprising captures in the newspapers, and it is certain he gave up the idea of going abroad."

"I think so too," exclaimed M. Plantat. "We must look for the fugitives in France."

"Yes," replied M. Lecoq. "Now, where and how can people effectually hide themselves in France? In the provinces? Evidently not. At Bordeaux, one of our largest cities, everyone stares at a man who is not a Bordelais. The shopkeepers say to their neighbours, 'Eh! do you know that man? Who is he? What is he after?' One may no doubt remain unnoticed at Lyons and Marseilles; but both these towns are miles and miles away, and a long journey must be risked to reach them. There's nothing so dangerous as the railway since the telegraph was established. We travel

quickly no doubt, but when a man gets into a railway carriage he shuts himself in, and until he reaches his destination he remains under the thumb of the police. Trémoré knows all this as well as we do; so I think we may put all the large towns, including even Lyons and Marseilles, out of the question."

"In short, it's impossible to hide in the provinces."

"Excuse me—there is one means of doing so—that is, simply to buy a modest little place in a secluded district, as far as possible from towns and railways, and to go and reside there under a false name. But this excellent plan is quite above Trémoré's intellect, and besides to prove successful it needs many preparatory steps which he could not venture on, being so closely watched by his wife. The field of investigation is thus greatly diminished. We need not occupy ourselves with foreign lands, with provincial towns, or rural districts. Paris only remains, and it is in Paris that we must look for Trémoré."

M. Lecoq spoke as precisely as a mathematical professor, and Papa Plantat listened as attentively as a zealous student. But he was already accustomed to the detective's method, and none of his deductions astonished him. During the last twenty-four hours he had carefully studied M. Lecoq's system of reasoning, and had almost appropriated it to himself. He found the process very simple, and could now readily explain to himself certain police exploits which had formerly seemed to him miraculous. However, M. Lecoq's "narrow field" of observation appeared still immense. "Paris is a large place," observed Papa Plantat.

"Perhaps so," replied the detective with a lofty smile, "but it is mine. All Paris is under the eyes of the police, just like an ant-bed under the inspection of a naturalist with his microscope. You might ask me how it happens that Paris still contains so many professional rogues, but this is because we are hampered by so many superfluous legal forms. In many cases our hands are indeed tied. We may only act in such and such a fashion, whereas our adversaries can use whatever weapons they please. The rogues are skilful no doubt, but even with all these drawbacks our skill is greater than theirs."

"However," interrupted M. Plantat, "Trémoré is now outside the pale of the law; we have a warrant for his apprehension."

"Ay, but does the warrant give me the right to search any house in which I may think he is hiding? No. Why, if I went to search for Hector at the house of one of his old friends, the latter would simply kick me out of doors. You must know that in France the police haven't merely to contend with rogues but with honest folks as well." M. Lecoq always waxed warm on this subject; for he indeed considered that his profession was most unjustly treated. Fortunately, just as he was growing most excited, the black pin-cushion suddenly caught his eye. "The devil!" exclaimed he, "I was forgetting Hector."

"You were saying we ought to search for him in Paris," remarked M. Plantat.

"And I said truly," replied the detective in a calmer tone. "I have come to the conclusion that the two fugitives are hidden here, perhaps at no great distance from us. But let's resume our examination of probabilities. Hector knows Paris too well to try and conceal himself even for a week in a hotel or lodging-house; he knows these establishments are too sharply watched by the police. However, he had plenty of time before him, and so he arranged to take a flat in some convenient house."

"He came to Paris three or four times some weeks ago."

"Then there's no longer any doubt about it. He hired some rooms under a false name, paid a quarter's rent in advance, and to-day he is comfortably installed in his new residence."

This surmise seemed greatly to distress Papa Plantat. "No doubt you are right," said he, sadly; "but in that case what can we do? One can't search every house in Paris."

"Wait a bit," interrupted M. Lecoq, somewhat curtly. "Don't trouble yourself to think, but just listen to me. When Trémoré had taken these rooms, he necessarily set about furnishing them. Well, he would naturally furnish them well. First of all, he is fond of luxury; secondly, he has plenty of money; and finally, he could not take a young girl away from a highly comfortable home and install her in a garret. However, though Hector still wished for a handsome establishment, he didn't dare go to a fashionable upholsterer. He is so well known on and about the boulevards that he would probably have been recognized. In buying his furniture, he must have assumed a false name—the same name he had taken when hiring his rooms. He chose some shrewd, second-class upholsterer, ordered his goods, made sure they would be delivered on a certain day, and paid for them."

M. Plantat nodded affirmatively. He already half understood the detective's plan. "This upholsterer," continued the latter, "must certainly have remembered this wealthy customer of his—a man who didn't haggle over his prices, but who paid him cash; and if he saw him again, he would no doubt recognize him."

"What a capital idea!" cried M. Plantat with delight. "Let's get some photographs of Trémoré as quick as possible—let's send a man to Orcival for them."

"Be easy on that point," answered M. Lecoq, with a shrewd smile. "I have done all that was necessary. In looking about, I found several photos of the count, and slipped three of them into my pocket yesterday. This morning I copied from the directory the names of all the upholsterers in Paris, and divided them into three lists. At the present moment, three of my men, each with a list and a photograph, are going from one upholsterer to the other, showing them the card, and asking them if they can recognize it as the portrait of one of their customers. If one of them answers 'yes,' we've got our man."

"And we will get him!" cried M. Plantat, pale with emotion.

"Don't be so eager. It is just possible that Hector was prudent enough not to go to the upholsterer's himself, in which case we are beaten in that direction. But no, I don't think he was so sly as that—"

At this moment, Janouille opened the door, and for the third time during the last half hour repeated that breakfast was waiting. She was a remarkable cook, as M. Plantat soon perceived. But he was not hungry, and, indeed, it was only with the greatest difficulty that he could force himself to eat. Anxiety robbed him of appetite. His mind was busy with the plan he wished to submit to the detective, and he felt oppressed and nervous, as is always the case when a man prepares to carry out a determination only arrived at with great hesitation and regret. M. Lecoq, who, like all men of marked activity, was a great eater, vainly tried to cheer his guest and rouse his appetite, offering him the choicest viands, and filling his glass with genuine, high-class Bordeaux. The old magistrate remained silent and preoccupied. He tried to speak out, but he could not overcome

his hesitation. When starting from Orcival that morning, he had never fancied he should experience such reluctance; he had intended to explain everything to the detective without the least reserve, and now it seemed as if the effort would be too great. Was it ridicule he feared? No, for his passion was above all dread of sarcasm or irony. What did he risk? Nothing; for had not M. Lecoq already divined those secret thoughts he dared not impart, and read his heart from the very first?

He was reflecting in this fashion when a ring was heard at the outer door. A moment later Janouille announced that a man named Goulard begged to speak with M. Lecoq, and asked if she should admit him. She received an affirmative reply, and after the chains had clanked and the locks had scraped, the Corbeil police-agent made his appearance. He had donned his best clothes and a clean shirt with a remarkably high collar. He was most respectful in manner, and stood before his superior as stiffly as a well-drilled grenadier in his captain's presence. "What the deuce brought you here?" said M. Lecoq, sternly; "and who dared to give you my address?"

"Please excuse me, monsieur," replied Goulard, plainly intimidated by his reception. "I was sent by Doctor Gendron with this letter for M. Plantat."

"Oh," cried the latter, "I asked the doctor last night to let me know the result of the autopsy, and not knowing where I might be in Paris, I took the liberty of giving him your address." Then as M. Lecoq handed him the letter, he added, "Read it, read it; there can be nothing to conceal in it."

"All right," rejoined Lecoq, "but come into the other room. Janouille, give this man some breakfast. Make yourself at home, Goulard, and empty a bottle to my health."

On reaching the inner room, M. Lecoq tore the envelope open, and read as follows:—"DEAR PLANTAT,—You asked me for a line or two, so I just scribble this, which I shall send to our sorcerer's—"

"Oh, ho," exclaimed the detective. "M. Gendron is really too flattering;" but though he spoke in this fashion he was really touched by the compliment. "At three o'clock this morning," he continued, resuming his perusal of the letter, "we exhumed poor Sauvresy's body. I certainly deplore the frightful circumstances of his death as much as any one; but, on the other hand, I could not help rejoicing at this excellent opportunity to test the efficacy of my sensitive paper—"

"Confound these men of science," cried Plantat, indignantly. "They are all alike!"

"Why so?" rejoined Lecoq. "I can quite understand the doctor's feelings. Am I not delighted when I encounter a great crime?" And without waiting for his guest's reply, he again turned to the letter: "The experiments promised to be all the more conclusive as aconitine is one of those drugs which most obstinately resist analysis. I proceed thus: After heating the suspected matter in twice its weight of alcohol, I gently pour the liquid into a vase of little depth, at the bottom of which lies a piece of paper on which I have placed my tests. If my paper retains its colour, there is no poison; but if it changes, poison is undoubtedly present. In this case my paper was of a light yellow tint, and to prove the presence of aconitine it should either become dotted with brown spots, or else turn completely brown. I explained this beforehand to the investigating magistrate and the experts who were assisting me. Ah, my friend, what a success I

had ! Scarcely had the first drops of alcohol fallen, than the paper at once turned a dark brown ; your suspicions are thus proved to be quite correct. The substances which I submitted to the test were perfectly saturated with aconitine. I never obtained more decisive results in my laboratory. No doubt, my conclusions may be disputed in court ; but I have means of proving their exactitude, and shall certainly confound any chemist who opposes me. You will therefore, no doubt, share the satisfaction I feel—”

“Good heavens !” cried M. Plantat, losing patience. “Who could ever imagine this poison was stolen from his own laboratory ? Poor Sauvresy’s body is nothing more to him than a suspected matter !” And he already imagines himself discussing the merits of his sensitive paper in court !”

“Oh, he is right in foreseeing that his conclusions may be contested,” pleaded the detective.

But Papa Plantat was not to be silenced. “Ah,” continued he, “Gendron experiments and analyses as if he had to deal with some dog’s remains. He goes to work cooking, boiling, and filtering, oblivious of everything else but his scientific arguments—”

M. Lecoq did not share his friend’s indignation ; he was not sorry at the prospect of a struggle in court, a great, scientific duel, like that famous encounter between Orfila and Raspail, the provincial and Parisian chemists. “If Trémoré dares to deny his part in Sauvresy’s murder,” said he, “we shall have a superb trial of it.”

This word “trial,” put an end to M. Plantat’s long hesitation. “We mustn’t have any trial,” he rejoined, in a tone of violence, greatly contrasting with his usual calmness and self-possession.

“Ah, ha,” thought M. Lecoq. “Now I’m going to know everything.” And he added aloud, “What ! no trial ?”

M. Plantat had turned very white ; he trembled and spoke in a strange, hoarse voice, half choked by noisy sobs. “I would give everything I have,” resumed he, “to avoid a trial. But how can we secure this wretch Trémoré from conviction ? What plan can we invent ? You alone, my friend, can advise me in this frightful emergency, and help me to act as I wish. If any means exist, you must know them. Only you can save me—”

“But, my—”

“Excuse me, listen, and you will understand. I am going to be frank with you, and explain to you my hesitation, my silence ; in short, all my conduct since the discovery of the crime.”

“I am listening.”

“It’s a sad story, Lecoq. I had reached an age at which a man’s career is, as they say, finished, when suddenly I lost my wife and my two sons—my whole joy, my whole hope in this world. I found myself alone in life, virtually homeless and abandoned. Chance brought me to Orcival. There I saw Laurence, who was then just fifteen—a marvel of intelligence, grace, innocence, and beauty. Courtois became my friend, and soon Laurence was like a daughter to me. I no doubt already loved her then, but I did not confess it to myself, for I did not read my heart clearly. She was so young, and my hair so grey. I persuaded myself that I loved her paternally, and that she looked up to me as to a second father. Ah, I spent many a delightful hour listening to her pretty prattle and innocent confidences. I was happy when I saw her bounding through my garden, plucking the roses I had reared for her, and ravaging my parterres ; and I said to myself that existence is a precious gift from God. My dream then was

to follow her through life. I fancied her wedded to some good man who would make her happy, while I remained her near and trusted friend. Despite her father's wealth, I took good care of my fortune, for I thought of her children, and wished to hoard up treasures for them. Poor, poor Laurence !”

He paused, and M. Lecoq fidgeted in his chair more moved than he cared to appear.

“One day,” continued Plantat, “my friend Courtois spoke to me of her marriage with Trémorrel, and then it was that I realized the depth of my love. I felt an agony it is impossible to describe; it was as if a long-smothered fire had suddenly burst out within me, threatening to devour everything. To be old, and to love a child ! I thought I was going mad; I tried to reason with myself, to realize how ridiculous I was, but it was of no avail. What are reason or irony against passion ? I kept silent and suffered. To crown everything, Laurence selected me as her confidant, and thus my tortures were increased. She would talk to me of Hector, expatiate on his person, qualities, and talents, so that it was soon evident she considered him superior to all other men.”

“Did you know what a wretch Trémorrel was ?”

“Unfortunately, I was yet ignorant of that. He lived at Valfeuillu, but what was that to me ? However, as soon as I discovered he was going to rob me of my most precious treasure, I began to study him. I should have been somewhat consoled if I had found him worthy of her; so I dogged him, just as you dog your criminals, M. Lecoq. I made several excursions to Paris to learn what I could of his past life; I became a detective, and went about questioning everyone who had known him, and the more I heard, the more I despised him. It was by this means that I learnt of his interviews with Jenny and his intercourse with Bertha.

“Why didn't you divulge all that ?”

“Honour commanded silence. Had I a right to destroy my friend Courtois' hopes and happiness, on account of my own ridiculous, hopeless love ? I did just speak to Courtois about Jenny, but he only laughed. When I hinted something against Hector to Laurence, she almost ceased coming to see me. After that I kept my own counsel.”

“Ah ! I shouldn't have had either your patience or your generosity.”

“Because you are not as old as I am, M. Lecoq. Oh, how I hated that man Trémorrel ! When I found three women of such different characters smitten with him, I could not help wondering what they loved him for.”

“Ah,” remarked M. Lecoq, “women often err; they don't judge men as we do.”

“Many a time,” resumed M. Plantat, “I thought of quarrelling with him, and provoking him to fight with me, so that I might kill him; but then Laurence would not have looked at me any more. However, I should perhaps have spoken at last, had not Sauvresy fallen ill and died. I knew that he had made his wife and Trémorrel swear to marry each other; I knew that a terrible motive compelled them to keep their oath; and I thought Laurence was saved. Alas, on the contrary she was lost ! One evening, as I passed near the mayor's house, I saw a man getting over the wall into the garden; it was Trémorrel. I distinctly recognised him. I was enraged beyond expression, and I swore I would wait and murder him. I did wait, but he did not come out that night.” M. Plantat hid his face in his hands; his heart bled at the recollection of that night of anguish, which he had passed waiting to kill his rival.

"Trémorel," cried M. Lecoq indignantly, "is a most abominable scoundrel. There is no excuse for his infamy and crime. And yet you want to save him from trial, from either the galleys or the scaffold."

Plantat paused a moment before replying. Of the many thoughts which now crowded tumultuously in his mind, he did not know which to express the first. Words seemed powerless to portray his sensations; he wanted to convey all he felt in a single sentence. "What does Trémorel matter to me?" said he at last. "Do you think I care about him? I don't care whether he lives or dies, whether he succeeds in escaping, or ends his life some morning on the Place de la Roquette."

"Then why have you such horror of a trial?"

"Because—"

"Are you a friend to his family; are you anxious about the great name he has covered with mud and infamy?"

"No, but I am anxious for Laurence, my friend; I only think of *her*."

"But she is not his accomplace; there's no doubt but what she's even still ignorant that he has killed his wife."

"Yes," resumed M. Plantat, "Laurence is innocent; she is only the villain's victim, and yet she would be the more cruelly punished of the two. If Trémorel is brought before the assize court, she will have to appear there also, as a witness, if not as a prisoner. And who knows but what she may be suspected? She will be asked whether she really had no knowledge of the project to murder Bertha, and whether she did not encourage it. Bertha was her rival; it would be natural to suppose she hated her. If I were the judge, I should not hesitate to include Laurence in the indictment."

"But with our assistance she will successfully prove that she was ignorant of everything; that she had been outrageously deceived."

"May be; but will she be any the less dishonoured and lost? Must she not, in that case, appear in public, answer the judge's questions, and tell the story of her shame? Must not she relate where, when, and how she erred, and repeat what the villain said to her? She must relate how she was induced to write that letter announcing her suicide, which well-nigh killed her parents with grief. For she never did so of her own free will. And worst of all, she will be compelled to confess her love for Trémorel."

"Don't let us exaggerate," answered the detective. "You know as well as I do that justice is most considerate with the innocent victims of affairs of this kind."

"Considerate? Eh! Could justice shield her, even if it wished to, from the publicity with which trials are conducted? You might touch the judges' hearts; but there are fifty journalists who have been getting their writing materials ready ever since they first heard of this crime. Do you think they would make no mention of the scandalous proceedings, I'm so anxious to avoid, simply to please us? With the murderer's noble name, isn't the case calculated to create a great sensation? Doesn't it combine every feature which gives success to judicial dramas? Oh, there's nothing wanting—neither unworthy passion, nor poison, nor vengeance, nor murder. Laurence represents the romantic, the sentimental element; she will become a heroine of the assize court; the reporters will relate when she blushes and when she weeps; they will try to outshine each other in describing her toilet and bearing. Then there will be the photographers besieging her; and if she refuses to sit, portraits of some street hussy will be sold as hers. She will yearn to hide herself—but where? Can a few locks and bars shield her from curiosity? She will become notorious. What shame and misery!

If she is to be saved, M. Lecoq, her name must not be spoken. I ask you is it possible? Answer me." The old man's manner was very violent, and yet his speech was simple enough. Anger and love alike gleamed in his eyes. As M. Lecoq remained silent he insisted, "Come tell me," said he.

"Who knows?" was the curt and dubious reply.

"Why seek to mislead me? resumed M. Plantat. "Haven't we both had experience in these things? If Trémoré is brought to trial, it's all over with Laurence. And I love her! Yes, I dare to confess it to you, I love her now as I never loved her before. She is dishonoured, an object of contempt; she perhaps still adores that scoundrel—but what matters it? I love her a thousand times more than before her fall, for then I loved her without hope, while now—" He stopped, shocked at what he was going to say. His eyes fell before M. Lecoq's steady gaze, and he blushed for the shameful yet human hope that he had betrayed. "You know everything now," he added, in a calmer tone; "you will consent to assist me, won't you? Ah, if you only would, I should not think I had repaid you were I to give you half my fortune—and I am yet rich—"

M. Lecoq stopped him with a haughty gesture. "Enough, M. Plantat," said he, in a bitter tone, "I can render a service to a person I esteem and pity with all my soul; but I cannot *sell* such a service."

"Believe me, I did not wish—"

"Yes, yes, you wished to pay me. Oh, don't excuse yourself, don't deny it. There are professions, I know, in which manhood and integrity seem to count for nothing. Why do you offer me money? What reason have you for judging me so mean as to sell my favours? You are like the rest; you can't fancy what a man in my position is. If I wanted to be rich—richer than you—I could become so in a fortnight. Don't you see that I hold in my hands the honour and lives of fifty people? Do you think I tell everything I know? I have here," added he, tapping his forehead, "twenty secrets that I could sell to-morrow, if I liked, for a plump hundred thousand francs apiece." He was indignant, but beneath his anger one could detect a sentiment of resignation. He had often to reject such offers. "I grant you readily enough," he resumed, "that people would laugh in your face if you tried to destroy this idea which has existed for ages; if you said that a detective is honest and can't be otherwise—that he is ten times more honest than any merchant or notary, for he has tenfold their temptations, without any advantages for his probity. Why, I could get at least a million francs together to-morrow, with impunity—without any risk whatever. It would be so easy for me to divulge what I know of those who have been obliged to trust me, or to tell things I have surprised; so there is perhaps some merit in holding my tongue. And yet the first man you might meet to-morrow—a fraudulent bankrupt just out of jail, or a notary who gambles on 'Change with his client's money—would feel himself compromised by walking up the boulevards with me! A police agent?—fie! However, as old Tabaret used to say to me, the contempt of such people is but one form of fear."

M. Plantat was greatly distressed. How could he, who prided himself on his delicacy, prudence, and finesse, have made such an awkward blunder? He had cruelly wounded the feelings of a man who was well disposed towards him, and this mishap might for ever ruin his hopes. "Believe me, my dear friend," he commenced, "I never intended the offence you imagined. You misunderstood an insignificant phrase, a slip of the tongue which had no meaning at all."

M. Lecoq grew calmer. "Perhaps so," he rejoined. "You will forgive

my being so susceptible, for I am more exposed to insults than most people. However, let's say no more on the subject, but return to Trémorel."

M. Plantat was just asking himself whether he might dare speak of his projects again, and he felt very grateful to the detective for so delicately relieving him of his anxiety. "I have only to await your decision," said he.

"I won't conceal from you," resumed M. Lecoq, "that what you ask of me is very difficult, and quite contrary to my duty, which commands me to search for Trémorel, arrest him, and deliver him up to justice. You ask me to protect him from the law—"

"In the name of an innocent creature, whom you will save by doing so," pleaded Papa Plantat.

"Once in my life I sacrificed my duty. I could not resist the tears of a poor old mother, who clung to my knees and begged mercy for her son. To-day I'm going to exceed my right, and risk an attempt for which my conscience will perhaps reproach me. However, I will do what I can to help you."

"Oh, my dear Lecoq, how grateful I feel!" cried M. Plantat joyfully.

"We must not be too hopeful," rejoined the detective, gravely. "There is only one means of keeping a criminal like Trémorel out of court; will it succeed?"

"Yes, yes. If you wish it, it will!"

M. Lecoq could not help smiling at his companion's faith. "I am certainly a clever detective," said he. "But I am only a man, after all; and I can't answer for another man's actions. Everything depends upon Hector. I should feel almost certain of success if I had to deal with any one else; but I must frankly confess, with him, I am very doubtful. The great point is, can we count on Mademoiselle Courtois showing any amount of firmness?"

"She is firmness itself."

"Then there's hope. But can we really suppress this affair? What will happen when Sauvresy's narrative is found? It must be concealed somewhere at Valfeuillu, although Trémorel did not find it."

"It won't be found," hastily replied M. Plantat.

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

M. Lecoq gave his companion a sharp glance, and merely ejaculated, "Ah!" But at the same time he was thinking to himself, "At last I am going to find out where that manuscript we heard read the other night came from."

After a moment's hesitation M. Plantat proceeded, "I have placed my life in your hands, M. Lecoq, and I can, of course, confide my honour to you. I know you; I know that, happen what may—"

"I shall keep my mouth shut, on my honour."

"Very well. The day that I caught Trémorel getting over the mayer's wall, I wished to verify my suspicions, and I opened Sauvresy's package of papers."

"And you did not use them?"

"I was dismayed at my abuse of confidence. And, besides, had I the right to rob poor Sauvresy of his vengeance?"

"But you gave the papers to Madame de Trémorel on her wedding-day?"

"True; but Bertha had a vague presentiment of the fate that was in store for her. Rather more than a fortnight ago she came and confided to

me her husband's manuscript, which she had taken care to complete very minutely, as you will have seen from my perusal."

"Why didn't you tell me all this? Why did you let me hunt, hesitate, and grope about—"

"I love Laurence, M. Lecoq, and to deliver up Trémorrel meant creating an abyss between her and me."

The detective bowed. "The deuce," thought he, "the old fellow's shrewd—as shrewd as I am. Well, I like him, and I'm going to give him a surprise."

M. Plantat yearned to question his host, and ascertain what was that sole plan he had spoken of, that might prevent a trial and save Laurence, but he did not dare to do so.

The detective bent over his desk, lost in thought. He held a pencil in his hand, and mechanically traced fantastic figures on a sheet of paper lying before him. Suddenly he started from his reverie. He had just arrived at a mental solution of some last difficulty: his plan was now complete. "Two o'clock," exclaimed he, glancing at the clock, "and I have an appointment between three and four with Madame Charman about Jenny."

"I am at your disposal," rejoined his guest.

"All right. When Jenny is disposed of, we will look after Trémorrel; so let's take our measures to finish everything to-day."

"What! do you hope to do everything to-day—"

"Certainly. Rapidity is especially requisite in our profession. It often takes a month to regain a lost hour. We've a chance now of catching Hector by surprise; to-morrow it will be too late. Either we shall have him within four-and-twenty hours, or else we shall have to change our batteries. Each of my three men has a vehicle and a good horse; they may be able to finish with the upholsterers within an hour from now. If I calculate right, we shall have the address in an hour, or at the most in a couple of hours, and then we will act."

As he spoke, Lecoq opened a blotting-pad and hurriedly wrote a few lines on a sheet of notepaper decorated with his crest. "This is what I've written to one of my lieutenants," said he; and he read aloud as follows:—"MONSIEUR JOB,—Get six or eight of our men together at once, and take them to the wine shop at the corner of the Rue des Martyrs and the Rue Lamartine; await my orders there."

"Why there and not here?" asked M. Plantat.

"Because we must avoid all useless running about. At the place I've named we shall be only a few yards from Madame Charman's, and Trémorrel's hiding-place will be nearly as close by, for the scoundrel has hired his rooms somewhere in the neighbourhood of Notre Dame de Lorette."

"What makes you think that?" asked M. Plantat with surprise.

The detective smiled indulgently. "Don't you recollect," said he, "that the envelope of the letter which Mademoiselle Courtois sent to her family, to announce her suicide, bore a Paris postmark, that of the branch office in the Rue St. Lazare? Now listen to this: On leaving her aunt's house, Laurence must have gone straight to Trémorrel's new apartments, of which he had given her the address, and where he had promised to meet her on Thursday morning. She wrote the letter on arriving. Is it probable that she had enough presence of mind to post the letter in another part of Paris? Was she not ignorant of the terrible reasons that led Trémorrel to fear search and pursuit? Had he sufficient foresight to suggest such a trick to her? Plainly not; for had he in the least degree thought of the matter

he would have told her not to post the letter in Paris at all, but somewhere outside. It is therefore almost certain it was posted at the nearest branch office."

These deductions were so simple that M. Plantat wondered he had not thought of them before. However, his anxiety was mainly turned in another direction. "It seems to me," he could not help remarking, "that if you wish to keep Hector from trial, the men you have summoned together will be more embarrassing than useful."

M. Lecoq thought he could detect a tinge of doubt in his guest's tone and look, and he felt somewhat irritated. "Do you distrust me, M. Plantat?" he asked.

The old man tried to protest, "Believe me—" he began.

"You have my word," resumed the detective, "and if you were better acquainted with me you would know that I always keep it. I have promised to do my best to save Mademoiselle Laurence; but remember I have only promised you assistance, not absolute success. Let me, then, take such measures as I think best." So saying, he rang for Janouille. "Here's a letter," said he, "which must be sent to Job at once."

"I will take it," answered the old woman.

"By no means. You will please remain here and wait for the men I sent out this morning. As they arrive, send them to the wine shop at the corner of the Rue des Martyrs; you know it—opposite the church. They'll find several of their colleagues there." While Lecoq gave these orders, he took off his dressing-gown, put on a long, black coat, and carefully adjusted his wig.

"Will monsieur be back this evening?" asked Janouille.

"I don't know."

"And if anybody comes from over yonder?" "Over yonder" with a detective always means "the prefecture of police."

"Say that I am out on the Corbeil affair." M. Lecoq was now ready. He had assumed the aspect and manners of a highly respectable chief-clerk of fifty. The expression of his features, the cut of his garments, even his gold spectacles and umbrella, all bespoke a man familiar with ledgers and counting-houses. "Now," said he to M. Plantat, "let's be off."

Goulard, who had made a hearty breakfast, was waiting for his superior in the dining-room. "Ah, ha, old fellow," remarked M. Lecoq, "so you've had a few words with my wine. How do you find it?"

"Delicious, my chief; perfect—that is to say, true nectar."

"It's cheered you up, I hope."

"Oh, yes, my chief."

"Then you may follow us, a little in the rear, and at the first house you see us enter, just mount proper guard at the door. I shall probably have to intrust you with a pretty girl, whom you must take to M. Domini. And keep your eyes open; for she's a sly creature, apt to inveigle you on the way and slip through your fingers." All three then went out, and Janouille stoutly barricaded the door behind them.

XXV

WHOEVER needs a loan of money, or a complete suit of fashionable clothes, a pair of boots, or an Indian cashmere, a porcelain table service, or a "genuine" Rembrandt; whoever wishes to expend money in diamonds,

plate or lace, or wishes to rent a house in the country, or to lay in a stock of firewood for the winter—may procure all these, and many other things besides, at Madame Charman's. Madame Charman lives at 136 Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, on the first floor. She does not give any credit or oblige a friend without some guarantee; but a woman, if she be young and pretty, may be accommodated at madame's, without sureties, at a reasonable rate of two hundred per cent. interest. At such terms she has considerable custom, and yet she has not made a large fortune. She necessarily has to risk a good deal, and there are heavy losses as well as large profits. Then, as she herself is pleased to say, she is too honest; and, true enough, she is so, for she would rather sell her dress off her back than allow her signature to be protested. Madame Charman has a slight figure and a fair complexion. She is even somewhat graceful, and altogether about as unlike a Jewess as it is possible to be. Summer and winter alike, she invariably wears a black silk dress. People say she has a husband, but no one has ever seen him, though this circumstance does not prevent her reputation from being above suspicion. However honourable as may be Madame Charman's calling, she has more than once had little accounts to settle with M. Lecoq; and she fears him as if he were fire. Accordingly she welcomed the detective and his companion—whom she took for one of his colleagues—as obsequiously as a stage supernumerary would greet his manager if the latter chanced to pay him a visit in his humble lodgings. She was expecting them. When they rang, she opened the door herself, and conducted them into her drawing-room, inviting them to sit down in her best easy-chairs, and pressing them to take some refreshments.

"I see, my dear madame," began M. Lecoq, "that you received my little note."

"Yes, M. Lecoq, early this morning; I was not up."

"Very good. And have you been so kind as to do me the service I asked?"

"How can you ask me, when you know that I would go through fire for you? I set about the matter at once, getting up expressly for the purpose."

"Then you've got the address of Pelagie Taponnet, whom her friends call Jenny?"

"Yes, I have got it," rejoined Madame Charman, with an obsequious bow. "If I were the kind of woman to magnify my services, I might invent a story and tell you what trouble it cost me to find her address, and how I scoured Paris and spent ten francs in cab hire."

"Well, let's come to the point."

"The truth is, I saw Jenny only the day before yesterday."

"You are joking!"

"Not the least in the world. And let me tell you that she's a very courageous, honest girl."

"Really."

"She is, indeed. Why, she owed me 480 francs for two years. I hardly thought the debt worth much, as you may imagine. But Jenny came to me the day before yesterday, all out of breath, and told me that she had inherited some money, and had brought me what she owed me. And she wasn't joking either; for her purse was full of bank-notes, and she paid me the whole of my bill. She's a good girl!" added Madame Charman, as if profoundly convinced of the truth of her encomium.

M. Lecoq exchanged a significant glance with Papa Plantat; the same idea struck them both at the same moment. These bank-notes could only

be the payment for some important service which Jenny had rendered to Trémorél. M. Lecoq, however, wished for more precise information. "What was Jenny's condition before this windfall?" asked he.

"Ah, M. Lecoq, she was in a dreadful state. Ever since the count deserted her she had been falling lower and lower. She sold everything she had bit by bit. At last she mixed with the worst kind of people, drank absinthe, they say, and had nothing left to put on her back. Whenever she got any money she spent it with a parcel of hussies instead of buying herself some clothes."

"And where is she living now?"

"Close by, in the Rue Vintimille."

"If that's the case," replied M. Lecoq, severely, "I am astonished that she is not here."

"It's not my fault," my dear M. Lecoq; "I know where the nest is, but not where the bird is. She was away this morning when I sent for her."

"The deuce! But then—it's very annoying; I must hunt her up at once."

"You needn't disturb yourself. Jenny ought to return before four o'clock, and one of my girls is waiting for her with orders to bring her here as soon as she comes home, without even letting her go up to her room."

"We'll wait for her then."

A quarter of an hour or so had elapsed when Madame Charman suddenly exclaimed, "I hear my girl's step on the stairs."

"Listen to me," answered M. Lecoq. "You must make Jenny think it was you who sent for her; we will seem to have come in by mere chance."

Madame Charman answered with a gesture of assent, and was going towards the door when the detective detained her by the arm. "One word more. When you see me fairly engaged in conversation with her, please be kind enough to go and overlook your work-girls in the front rooms. What I have to say will not interest you in the least."

"I understand."

"But no trickery, mind. I am acquainted well enough with the situation of your dressing room to know that everything that is said here may be overheard in it."

Madame Charman's girl at this moment opened the door; there was a loud rustling of silk along the passage; and Jenny appeared in all her glory. She was no longer the fresh, piquante daughter of Paris, whom Hector had known. A single year had withered her, just as one summer withers the roses. She was not yet twenty, and yet she would almost have been taken for an old coquette. No one would have supposed that she had once been truly charming, for vice had strangely aged her; her worn features and hollow cheeks, plastered with rouge and white, bespoke a life of dissipation. Her eyes had lost their tenderness, and fixed you with a brazen stare; her lips, once daintily curved into a bewitching smile, were deformed by a cynical twinge; and absinthe had broken the clear tone of her voice. She wore a new silk robe, richly trimmed with lace, and a jaunty hat; but her attire, striking as it was, could by no means compensate for her loss of beauty. She entered the room with a haughty step, and, without condescending to bow to any one, angrily exclaimed, "What an idea! to send for me to come here in this way! Your girl is a most impudent young woman. She almost brought me here by force!"

Madame Charman hastened towards her old customer, embraced her in spite of herself, and pressed her to her heart. "Why, don't be so angry,

dear; I thought you would be delighted, and overwhelm me with thanks."

"I? What for?"

"Because, my dear girl, I had a surprise in store for you. Ah, I'm not ungrateful; you came here yesterday and settled your account with me, and to-day I mean to reward you for it. Come, cheer up; you're going to have a splendid chance, because just at this moment I happen to have a piece of exquisite velvet—"

"A pretty thing to bring me here for!"

"All silk, my dear, at thirty francs the yard. It is wonderfully cheap, I can tell you."

"Eh! What do I care for your 'chance?' Velvet in July! Are you making fun of me?"

"Let me show it you, now."

"Never! I am expected to dinner at Asnières, and so—" She turned on her heels without finishing her phrase, and would have left the room despite all Madame Charman's attempts to detain her, if M. Lecoq had not thought it time to interfere.

"Why! am I mistaken?" cried he, in a tone of amazement; "is it really Mademoiselle Jenny that I have the honour of seeing?"

She scanned him with mingled anger and surprise, and answered, "Yes, it's I: what of it?"

"What! Are you so forgetful? Don't you recognise me?"

"No, not at all."

"And yet I was one of your admirers once, my dear, and used to breakfast with you when you lived near the Madeleine; in the count's time, you know." He took off his spectacles as if to wipe them, but in reality to dart a furious look at Madame Charman, who, not daring to resist, beat a hasty retreat. "I knew Trémorrel well in other days," resumed the detective. "And, by the bye, have you heard any news of him lately?"

"I saw him about a week ago."

"Stop, though—haven't you heard of that horrible affair?"

"No. What is it?"

"Really, now, haven't you heard? Don't you read the papers? It's a most dreadful thing; all Paris has been talking about it during the last forty-eight hours."

"Tell me about it—quick!"

"Well, you know that he married the widow of one of his friends. Everyone thought he was very happy at home; not at all; he has murdered his wife with a knife."

Jenny turned pale under her paint. "Is it possible?" she stammered; but although she seemed greatly affected, she was plainly not particularly surprised.

"Yes, it's not merely possible," rejoined M. Lecoq, "it's certain, for at this very moment he's in prison, and he will soon be tried, and no doubt convicted."

M. Plantat scrutinized Jenny attentively; he expected an outburst of despair, possibly a swoon. But his anticipations were not realized. Jenny now detested Trémorrel. At times she felt the weight of her degradation, and rightly ascribed her present ignominy to Hector. Although she smiled when she saw him, her only object was to get as much money out of him as she could. No sooner did he turn his back than she heartily cursed him. Thus instead of bursting into tears, she indulged in a loud laugh.

"Well done for Trémoré," said she. "Why did he leave me? Good for her too."

"Why so?"

"What did she deceive her first husband for? Why, it was she who took Hector from me—she, a rich, married woman! But I always said Hector was a poor, weak wretch."

"Frankly, that's my notion too. When a man acts as Trémoré acted towards you, he's a villain."

"Ah! so I'm right then?"

"Parbleu! But I'm not surprised at his conduct. For his wife's murder is the least of his crimes; why, he tried to palm it off on someone else!"

"That doesn't surprise me."

"He accused a poor devil as innocent as you or I, who might have been condemned to death if he hadn't been able to tell where he was on Wednesday night." M. Lecoq said this with affected carelessness, though at the time he kept his eyes fixed on Jenny.

"Do you know who the man was?" asked she in a tremulous voice.

"The papers say he was Hector's gardener."

"A shortish fellow, eh? thin, very dark, with black hair?"

"Just so."

"And whose name was—wait a bit—ah—Guespin!"

"Ah ha, you know him then?"

Jenny hesitated. She was perceptibly trembling, and evidently regretted that she had gone so far. "Bah!" said she at last. "I don't see why I shouldn't tell what I know. I'm an honest girl, if Trémoré's a rogue; and I don't want them to condemn a poor devil who's innocent."

"You know something about it, then?"

"Well, I know nearly all about it—that's honest, ain't it? About a week ago Hector wrote to me to meet him at Melun; I went, found him, and we breakfasted together. Then he told me that he was very much annoyed about his cook's marriage; for one of his servants was deeply in love with her, and might go and raise a rumpus at the wedding."

"Ah, so he spoke to you about that wedding?"

"Wait a minute," replied Jenny, and with some little hesitation, as if she were trying to remember exactly what the count had said to her, she continued as follows:—"Hector seemed very embarrassed, as if he didn't know how to avoid the disturbance he feared, so at last I advised him to send the servant off out of the way, on the wedding-day. He thought my advice very good; and after a moment he said that on the evening of the wedding, he would send the man on an errand for me, bidding him keep the matter a secret from the countess. I was to dress up as a lady's maid, and wait for this fellow at a café on the Place du Châtelet, between half-past nine and ten o'clock in the evening. He told me to sit at the table on the right-hand side of the door, with a bouquet in my hand, so that this fellow—Guespin—might recognise me. He would come in and give me a package, and then I was to ask him to have something to drink, get him tipsy if possible, and then walk about Paris with him till the morning."

"And you," interrupted M. Lecoq, "did you believe all this story about a jealous servant?"

"Not quite; but I fancied Hector had some intrigue in hand, and I wasn't sorry to help him deceive that wife of his, whom I detested."

"So you did as he told you?"

"Exactly, from beginning to end; everything happened just as Hector had foreseen. The man arrived just at ten o'clock, took me for a lady's maid, and gave me the package. I offered him a glass of beer; he accepted it, and treated me to another. He's a very nice fellow, this gardener, and I passed a very pleasant evening with him. He knew lots of queer things, and—"

"Never mind that. What did you do afterwards?"

"Well, after the beer we had some wine, then some beer again, then some punch, then some more wine—for the gardener had his pockets full of money. By eleven he was quite tipsy, and invited me to go and have a dance with him at Batignolles. I refused, and asked him to escort me back to my mistress's at the upper end of the Champs-Élysées. We left the café and walked up the Rue de Rivoli, stopping every now and then to have some more wine or some more beer. By two o'clock the fellow was so far gone that he fell like a lump on to a bench near the Arc de Triomphe, and went to sleep; and there I left him."

"Well, and where did you go?"

"Oh, I went home."

"And what has become of that package?"

"Oh, I intended to throw it unto the Seine, as Hector wished, but I forgot to do so. You see I had drunk almost as much as the gardener—so I carried it back home with me, and it is in my room now."

"Have you opened it?"

"Yes, and I found it contained a hammer, two other tools, and a large knife."

Guespin's innocence was now evident, and the detective's deductions were fully realized. "Guespin's all right," said M. Plantat. "But we must know—"

M. Lecoq interrupted him; he knew all he wished to know. Jenny could tell him nothing more, so suddenly assuming a tone of severity, "My fine young woman," said he, "you have saved an innocent man, but you must repeat what you have just said to the investigating magistrate at Corbeil. And to prevent you loosing your way, I'll just give you a guide." With these words he opened the window, and, calling to Goulard, bade him come upstairs. Then turning once more to Jenny, who was apparently paralyzed with surprise and fright, he added, "Tell me how much Trémoré paid you for the service you rendered him."

"Ten thousand francs; but it was my due, I swear to you; for he had promised it me long ago; it was money he owed me."

"All right; it can't be taken away from you," replied Lecoq, and pointing to Goulard, who was then entering the room, he continued, "Go with this man to your lodgings, take the package which Guespin gave you, and set out at once for Corbeil. Above all, no tricks, Miss—or beware of me!"

Madame Charman came in just in time to see Jenny leave with Goulard. "Lord! what's the matter?" she asked M. Lecoq.

"Nothing, my dear madame, nothing that concerns you in the least. And so, thank you and good-evening; we are in a great hurry."

XXVI.

WHEN M. Lecoq was in a hurry he walked fast. Indeed he almost ran down the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, so that Plantat had great difficulty in keeping up with him. "All goes well," muttered the detective, sufficiently loud for his companion to overhear him; "we shall succeed. A campaign which begins so well seldom finishes badly. If Job is at the wine shop, and if one of my men has succeeded in his search, the crime of Valfeuilu is solved, and in a week people will have forgotten it." Just as they were reaching the church at the bottom of the street, he paused and said to Plantat, "I must ask you to forgive me for hurrying you on like this and making you one of my trade; but your assistance might have been very useful at Madame Charman's, and it will be indispensable when we get fairly on Trémoré's track."

Crossing the open space in the rear of the Church of Notre Dame de Lorette, they entered the wine shop at the corner of the Rue des Martyrs. The landlord was standing behind his counter pouring some wine out of a large metal jug into some bottles. "Aren't there eight or ten men waiting for somebody here?" asked M. Lecoq with an air of easy familiarity.

"Yes, they came about an hour ago."

"Are they in the big back room?"

"Just so, monsieur," responded the publican, obsequiously. He didn't exactly know who was talking to him, but he suspected the new comer and his companion to be some superior officers from the prefecture; and he was not surprised to see that these distinguished personages should know the ins and outs of his house. So he opened the door of the room referred to without the least hesitation. Over a dozen men in various guises were drinking there and playing cards. When M. Lecoq and M. Plantat entered they at once rose respectfully to their feet and took off their hats. "That's proper, Job," said M. Lecoq to the one who seemed the chief, "you are prompt, and it pleases me. Your ten men will be quite enough, for besides them I see I have the three I sent out this morning." M. Job bowed, happy at having pleased a master who was not very prodigal in his praises. "I want you to wait here a little while longer," resumed M. Lecoq, "for my orders will depend on the report I'm expecting." Then turning to the men he had sent out among the upholsterers, he asked, "Which of you was successful?"

"I, monsieur," replied a tall fellow with a pale face and budding moustaches.

"What! you again, Palot? really, my lad, you are lucky. Step into this side room—first, though, order a bottle of wine, and ask the landlord to see we are not disturbed."

These orders were soon executed, and Palot and M. Plantat having entered the side room with him, M. Lecoq prudently turned the key. "Now speak up," said he to Palot, "and be brief."

"I showed the photograph to at least a dozen upholsterers without any result; but at last one named Rech, living in the Faubourg St. Germain, recognized it."

"Tell me just what he said, if you can."

"He told me it was the portrait of one of his customers, who came to him a month or so ago to buy a lot of furniture—suites for a drawing-room,

dining-room, bed-room, and the rest—all for a little house he had just rented. He did not beat him down at all, and only made one condition in purchasing—that everything should be in place, and quite ready, including curtains and carpets, within three weeks from that time—that is, a week ago last Monday.”

“And what was the price he paid?”

“Eighteen thousand francs, half in advance, and half on delivery.”

“What name did this customer give?”

“He called himself Mr. James Wilson; but M. Rech said he didn’t look like an Englishman.”

“Where does he live?”

“The furniture was taken to a small house, No. 34 Rue St. Lazare, near the railway station.”

M. Lecoq’s face, which had heretofore worn an anxious expression, now beamed with joy. He felt the natural pride of a general who has succeeded in his plans for the enemy’s destruction. He tapped Papa Plantat familiarly on the shoulder, and pronounced a single word, “Nipped!”

Palot shook his head. “It isn’t certain,” said he.

“Why?”

“When I got the address, I had a lot of time left on my hands, so I went to reconnoitre the house.”

“Well?”

“The tenant’s name is really Wilson, but it’s not the man of the photograph, I’m certain.”

M. Plantat gave a groan of disappointment, but M. Lecoq was not so easily discouraged. “How did you find that out?”

“I pumped one of the servants.”

“Confound you!” cried M. Plantat. “Perhaps you roused suspicions.”

“Oh no,” answered M. Lecoq. “I’ll answer for him. Palot is a pupil of mine. Explain yourself, Palot.”

“When I found the house—an elegant affair it is, too—I said to myself, ‘I faith, here’s the cage; let’s see if the bird’s in it.’ I luckily happened to have a napoleon in my pocket; and I slipped it without hesitation into the little drain leading from the house to the street gutter.”

“Then you rang?”

“Exactly. The door porter—there is a porter—opened the door, and then, looking as vexed as I could, I told him that, in pulling out my handkerchief, I had dropped a twenty-franc piece into the drain, and begged him to lend me something to try to get it out with. He lent me a poker and took another himself, and we got the money out easily enough. Of course I expressed my delight, and begged him to let me treat him to a glass of wine.”

“Not bad.”

“Oh, M. Lecoq, it is one of your tricks, you know. The porter accepted my invitation, and we adjourned to a wine shop over the way, where we soon became the best friends in the world. We were talking pleasantly together when, all of a sudden, I stooped down as if I had just noticed something on the floor, and picked up—the photograph, which I had previously dropped and soiled a little with my boot. ‘What have we got here?’ said I; ‘a portrait?’ My new friend took it, looked at it, and didn’t seem to recognize it. Then, to make certain, I said, ‘he’s a good-looking fellow, ain’t he now? Your master must be some such a man.’ But he said no, for the man in the photo wore a full beard, while his master was as clean-shaven as a priest. ‘Besides,’ added he, ‘my master’s an American; he

gives us our orders in French, but madame and he always talk English together."

M. Lecoq's eyes glistened as Palot proceeded. "Trémorel speaks English, doesn't he?" he asked, turning to M. Plantat.

"Very fairly; and Laurence too."

"If that is so, we are on the right track, for we know that Trémorel shaved his beard off on the night of the murder. We can proceed." Palot in the meanwhile seemed somewhat uneasy at not receiving the praise he had hoped for. "My lad," said M. Lecoq, turning to him, "I think you have done admirably, and a good reward shall prove it to you. As you were ignorant of what we know, your conclusions were perfectly right. But let's go to the house at once; have you got a plan of the ground-floor?"

"Yes, and of the first floor, too. The porter got very talkative after drinking a couple of glasses of wine, and he gave me a good deal of information about his master and mistress, though he has only been there two days. The lady is dreadfully melancholy," he said, "and cries all the time."

"We know that; now describe us the house."

"Well, you go in by a large *porte cochère*, which leads through into a courtyard with a stable and carriage-house at the other end. The porter's quarters are on the left of the archway; while on the right a glass door opens on to a flight of six stone steps, with a vestibule above, conducting to the drawing-room, dining-room, and two other little rooms. The rooms on the first floor are a study, a—"

"Enough," interrupted M. Lecoq, "my plan's made." And rising abruptly, he opened the door, and followed by M. Plantat and Palot, returned into the large room. All the men rose as on the occasion of his first arrival. "M. Job," said the detective, "listen attentively to what I have to say. As soon as I am gone, pay what you owe here, and then, as I must have you all within reach, go and install yourselves in the first wineshop on the right as you go up the Rue d'Amsterdam. Have your dinner there, for you will have time to do so—but soberly, you understand." And taking two napoleons out of his pocket and placing them on the table, he added, "That's for the dinner."

M. Lecoq and Papa Plantat left the establishment, closely followed by Palot. The detective was anxious to see for himself the house which Trémorel had rented. He perceived at a glance that the interior arrangements must be as Palot had stated. "That's it, undoubtedly," said he to M. Plantat; "we've got the game in our hands. Our chances at this moment are ninety to ten."

"What are you going to do?" asked the old magistrate, whose emotion increased as the decisive moment approached.

"Nothing, just yet. I must wait for night-time before I act; and as it won't be dark for another two hours, let's imitate my men; I know a restaurant close here where we can dine capitably; we'll patronize it." And without waiting for a reply, he led M. Plantat towards a restaurant in the Passage du Havre. However, before entering, he paused and signalled Palot to approach. "I give you two hours," he said, "to have some dinner and get yourself up so that the porter won't recognize you. You must be an upholsterer's journeyman. Now clear out; I shall wait for you here."

M. Lecoq was right when he said that a capital dinner was to be had in the Passage du Havre; but unfortunately M. Plantat was not in a state of mind to appreciate good cooking. He was so anxious and depressed that he found it difficult to swallow anything whatever. He longed to know the de-

tective's plans ; but M. Lecoq remained impenetrable, answering all inquiries with "Let me act, and trust me." Now, M. Plantat's confidence was no doubt very great ; but the more he reflected, the more perilous and difficult seemed the attempt to save Trémorrel from trial. He was tortured by most poignant doubts. His own life was at stake ; for he had sworn to himself that if Laurence were forced to confess her dishonour and her love for Hector in open court, he would not survive her. M. Lecoq tried hard to induce his companion to eat something, but he could scarcely prevail upon him to take at least some soup and a glass of old Bordeaux. Perceiving the uselessness of his efforts, he at last went on with his own dinner as if he were alone. He was very thoughtful, but any uncertainty as to the result of his plans never entered his head. He eat with evident appreciation of the *chef's* culinary talents, and soon emptied his bottle of Léoville. Dusk was now falling, the waiters began to light the chandeliers, and the two friends found themselves almost alone.

"Isn't it time to begin ?" asked M. Plantat, timidly.

"We have still nearly an hour," replied M. Lecoq, consulting his watch ; "but I shall begin my preparations at once." Thereupon he called a waiter, and ordered a cup of coffee and writing materials. "You see," said he, while he was waiting to be served, "we must try to get at Laurence without Trémorrel's knowing it. We must have ten minutes' talk with her alone, in the house. That is absolutely necessary to ensure our success."

M. Plantat had evidently been expecting some immediate and decisive action, for M. Lecoq's remark filled him with alarm. "If that's so," said he mournfully, "it's all over with our project."

"How so ?"

"Because Trémorrel won't leave Laurence by herself for a moment."

"Then I'll try to entice him out."

"Do you really think he will let himself be taken in by a trick ? You don't consider his situation at this moment. He must be a prey to the greatest apprehension. Though we know that Sauvresy's declaration will not be found, he doesn't know it ; he thinks that it has perhaps been found already, that suspicions have been roused, and that he is already being searched for by the police."

"I've considered all that," rejoined M. Lecoq with a triumphant smile, "and many other things besides. Well, I'll admit it isn't easy to decoy Trémorrel out of the house, but after cudgelling my brain about it a good deal, I think I've found a way at last. The idea occurred to me just as we came in here. In an hour from now the Count de Trémorrel will be in the Faubourg St. Germain. It's true it will cost me a forgery, but you will forgive me under the circumstances. Besides, the object justifies the means."

He took up a pen, and while smoking his cigar, rapidly wrote as follows : — "MONSIEUR WILSON,—Four of the thousand-franc notes which you paid me are counterfeits ; I have just found it out by sending them to my banker's. If you are not here to explain the matter before ten o'clock, I shall be obliged to send a complaint to the public prosecutor this evening. —RECH."

"Now," said M. Lecoq, passing the letter to his companion. "Do you understand."

M. Plantat read the note at a glance, and could not restrain a joyful exclamation, which caused the waiters to turn round and stare at him. "Yes," said he, "that'll catch the scoundrel ; it'll frighten him out of all his other terrors. He will say to himself that he might perhaps have received

some counterfeit notes and have slipped them among those paid to the upholsterer, that a complaint against him will provoke an inquiry, and that he will have to prove that he is really M. Wilson or else he's lost."

"So you think he'll come out?"

"I'm surc of it, unless he has gone mad."

"We shall succeed then, for this is the only, serious obstacle—" Lecoq paused abruptly, for some one outside was just opening the restaurant door. Immediately afterwards a man's head just popped in and then almost instantly withdrew. "That's my assistant," resumed the detective, calling the waiter to pay for the dinner, "he is waiting for us in the passage; let us go."

A young fellow dressed like a journeyman upholsterer was sauntering along the passage looking in at the shop windows. He had long brown hair, and his moustache and eyebrows were quite black. M. Plantat certainly did not recognise him as Palot, but M. Lecoq did, and even seemed dissatisfied with his get up. "Bad," growled he, "pitiable. Do you think that changing your hair is enough to disguise yourself? Look in that glass, and tell me if the expression of your face isn't just what it was before? Isn't your smile and aren't your eyes the same? Then your cap's too much on one side, that's not natural; and you put your hand in your pocket awkwardly."

"I'll try to do better another time, M. Lecoq," Palot modestly replied.

"I hope so; but I guess the porter won't recognize you to-night, and that is all we want."

"And now, what am I to do?"

"I'll give you your orders; and be very careful not to make the slightest mistake. First, hire a cab, with a good horse; then go to the wine-shop for one of our men, who will accompany you to M. Wilson's house. When you get there, ring, enter alone, and give the porter this letter, saying that it is of the utmost importance. Directly that's done, place yourself in ambush near the house with your comrade. If M. Wilson goes out—and he will go out, or else I'm not Lecoq—send your comrade to me at once. As for you, follow M. Wilson, and don't lose sight of him. He will take a cab, and you must follow him with yours, getting up on the driver's seat and keeping a good look-out. Have your eyes open, for he might feel inclined to jump out of his cab and leave you in pursuit of an empty vehicle."

"Yes, and the moment I am informed—"

"Silence, please, when I'm speaking. He will probably go to the upholsterer's in the Rue des Saints-Pères; but I may be mistaken, for he may also drive to one of the railway stations, and take the first train that leaves. In this case, you must get into the same railway carriage as he does, and follow him everywhere he goes; and be sure and send me a despatch as soon as you can."

"Very well, M. Lecoq; only if I have to take a train—"

"What! haven't you any money?"

"Well—no, my chief."

"Then take this five-hundred-franc note; that's more than is necessary to go round the world. Do you understand everything?"

"I beg your pardon—what shall I do if M. Wilson simply returns to his house?"

"In that case I will finish him. If he returns, you will come back with him, and the moment his cab stops before the house give two whistles, you know how. Then wait for me in the street, taking care to retain your cab, which you will lend to M. Plantat if he needs it."

"All right," said Palot, who then hastened off without more ado.

M. Plantat and the detective being left alone, paced the gallery in silence; for they were both too occupied with their thoughts to speak. They had taken a few turns when M. Lecoq suddenly started, having just perceived one of his agents at the end of the gallery. So great was his impatience that he ran forward to meet him. "Well?" he asked.

"Monsieur, the game has flown, and Palot after him!"

"On foot, or in a cab?"

"In a cab."

"All right. Return to your comrades, and tell them to hold themselves ready."

Everything was progressing as Lecoq wished, and in his satisfaction he was about to grasp Papa Plantat's hand, when he noticed how haggard the old magistrate looked. "What, are you ill?" he asked, anxiously.

"No, but I am fifty-five years old, M. Lecoq, and at that age there are emotions which kill one. You see I am trembling at the moment when I see my wishes being realised, and I feel as if a disappointment would kill me. I'm afraid; yes, I'm afraid. Ah, why can't I dispense with following you!"

"But your presence is indispensable; without your help I can do nothing."

"What can I do?"

"Save Laurence, M. Plantat."

The detective's reply restored some of his companion's courage. "If that's so—" said he, and he began to walk firmly towards the street.

"Not yet," remarked M. Lecoq, detaining him, "not yet; the battle now depends on the precision of our movements. A single blunder might upset all my combinations, and then I should be forced to arrest and deliver up the criminal. We must have ten minutes' conversation with Made-moiselle Laurence, but not much more, and it is absolutely necessary that our interview with her should be suddenly interrupted by Trémoré's return. Let's make our calculations. It will take the rascal half-an-hour to go to the Rue des Saints-Pères, where he will find nobody; and as long to get back; let us throw in fifteen minutes as a margin; in all, an hour and a quarter. Well, we have forty minutes left us."

M. Plantat did not reply, but the detective remarked that it would never do for him to remain on his feet after such a fatiguing day, and especially as he had scarcely eaten anything since the evening before. They accordingly entered a neighbouring café, where M. Lecoq prevailed on his companion to eat a biscuit and drink a glass of wine. Then, as neither was in a mood for conversation, the detective took up an evening paper and soon seemed absorbed in the latest news from Germany. M. Plantat, leaning back in his chair, and, raising his eyes to the ceiling, mentally passed in review the events of the past four years. It seemed to him but yesterday that Laurence—still a child—ran along his garden path plucking his roses and honeysuckle. How pretty she was, and how divinely her blue eyes beamed! Then, as it seemed, between dusk and dawn, as a rose blooms on a June night, the pretty child had become a sweet and radiant maiden. She was timid and reserved with every one but him—was he not her best friend, the confidant of all her little griefs and innocent hopes? How frank and pure she was then; how perfectly ignorant of evil!

Nine o'clock struck and M. Lecoq laid down his paper. "Let us go," said he.

M. Plantat followed him with a firmer step, and they soon reached M.

Wilson's house, accompanied by Job and his men. "You fellows," said M. Lecoq, "must wait till I call, before going in; I will leave the door ajar." So saying he rang the bell, the door swung open; and M. Plantat and the detective went in under the arch-way. The porter was standing on the threshold of his room. "M. Wilson?" asked M. Lecoq.

"He is out."

"I will speak to Madame, then."

"She is out as well."

"All right. Only, as I must positively speak with Madame Wilson, I'm going up stairs."

The porter seemed inclined to resist this intrusion by force; but, as Lecoq now summoned his men, he thought better of it and kept quiet. M. Lecoq posted six of his agents in the courtyard, in such a position that they could be easily seen from the windows on the first floor, and instructed the others to station themselves across the street and to keep a good watch of the house. Having taken these measures, he returned to the porter. "Attend to me, my man," said he. "When your master who has gone out comes home again, be sure you don't tell him that we are upstairs; a single word would get you into terribly hot water—"

"I am blind," he answered, "and deaf."

"How many servants are there in the house?"

"Three; but they have all gone out."

The detective then grasped M. Plantat firmly by the arm. "You see, my dear friend," said he, "the game is ours. Come along and be brave for Laurence's sake!"

XXVII.

ALL M. Lecoq's anticipations were realized. Laurence was not dead, and her letter to her parents was but a blind. It was really she who lived in Hector's house as Madame Wilson. How did it happen that this beautiful young girl had become reduced to such a dreadful extremity? The logic of life unfortunately often shackles our will, and rivets one determination to the other. Often, an indifferent action, little wrongful in itself, is but the prelude of an atrocious crime. Each new resolution depends upon those that have preceded it, becoming their logical sequence, just as the sum total is the product of the added figures. Woe to the man who, seized with dizziness on the brink of the precipice, does not fly as far and as fast as possible, without once pausing; for soon, yielding to an irresistible attraction, he approaches, risks the danger, slips, and is lost. Whatever he may do or attempt thereafter, he will only roll the lower and the faster until he reaches the very bottom of the gulf. Trémoré was by no means one of those ferocious implacable ruffians who must quench their thirst for blood at any price. In fact he was naturally feeble and cowardly; and yet he had committed the most atrocious crimes. All his guilt, however, sprang from the first feeling of envy he had had for Sauvresy, and which he had not taken the pains to subdue. On the day that Laurence, fascinated by Trémoré, had allowed him to press her hand, and kept it from her mother, she was virtually lost. That one caress had by a natural sequence of consequences led her to feign suicide and fly with her lover; and it might yet conduct her to infanticide.

Left alone, after Hector had started for the Faubourg St. Germain,

Laurence's mind turned instinctively to the events of the past year. How unlooked for they had been ! It seemed as if she had been whirled along by a tempest, without a moment to think or act freely. She asked herself if she were not suffering from some hideous nightmare, and if she should not presently awake in her pretty maidenly chamber at Orcival. Was it really she who was there in this strange house, dead to every one ; reduced to live under a false name ; without family or friends henceforth, or any one in the world to help her ; at the mercy of a fugitive like herself, who was fated to break to-morrow the capricious ties that momentarily united them ? Was it really true she was about to become a mother, and must she blush for that maternity which is the pride of pure young wives ? A thousand memories of her past life darted through her mind and cruelly revived her despair. Her heart sank as she thought of her old friendships, of her mother, her sister, the pride of her innocence, and the pure joys of home. Half reclining on a divan in Hector's library, she wept freely. She bewailed her broken life, her lost youth, her vanished hopes, the world's esteem, and her own self-respect, which she should never recover.

Suddenly the door abruptly opened. Laurence thought it was Hector returning, and hastily rose, passing her handkerchief across her eyes to try to conceal that she had been crying. But a man unknown to her stood on the threshold, bowing respectfully. She was afraid, for Trémoré had frequently said to her within the last two days, "we are pursued, we must take care to conceal ourselves ;" and though it seemed to her that she had nothing to fear, she trembled instinctively. "Who are you ?" she asked haughtily, "and who has admitted you here ? What do you want ?"

M. Lecoq left nothing to chance or inspiration ; he foresaw everything, and regulated affairs in real life as a dramatist regulates scenes on the stage. He had expected this natural indignation and these questions, and was prepared for them. His only reply was to step aside, thus revealing M. Plantat's presence.

Laurence was so much overcome on recognizing her old friend that she almost fell. "You !" she stammered, "you !" But the old magistrate was, if possible, more agitated than herself. Was that really his Laurence there before him ? Grief had greatly aged her in a few days. "Why did you seek for me ?" she resumed. "Why add another sorrow to my life ? Ah, I told Hector that the letter he dictated to me would not be believed. There are misfortunes one can only escape from by death.

M. Plantat was about to reply, but Lecoq was determined to take the lead in the interview. "It is not you, madame, that we are seeking for," said he, "but M. de Trémoré."

"Hector ! And why, if you please ? Is he not free ?"

M. Lecoq hesitated before revealing everything to the poor girl who had trusted so fondly in the author of her ruin. However, he thought that the cruel truth would be less hard to bear than all the agony of suspense. "M. de Trémoré," he answered, "has committed a great crime."

"He ! You lie, sir."

"Unhappily, I have told you the truth," replied the detective shaking his head sorrowfully. "M. de Trémoré murdered his wife on Wednesday night. I am a detective, and I have a warrant to arrest him."

He thought this terrible charge would overwhelm Laurence ; but he was mistaken. Although she was thunderstruck, she stood firm. The crime horrified her, but it did not seem to her entirely improbable, knowing as she did how bitterly Hector hated his wife. "Well, perhaps he did," cried

she, sublime in her energy and despair, "I am his accomplice, then—arrest me."

This cry, seemingly inspired by senseless passion, amazed M. Plantat, but it did not surprise the detective. "No, madame," he resumed, "you are not this man's accomplice. Besides, the murder of his wife is the least of his crimes. Do you know why he did not marry you? Because, conjointly with Madame Bertha, he poisoned M. Sauvresy, who saved his life and was his best friend. We have the proof of it."

This was more than Laurence could bear; she staggered and fell upon a sofa. But she did not doubt the truth of what was told her. This terrible revelation tore away the veil which had hitherto shrouded the past in mystery. The poisoning of Sauvresy explained all Hector's conduct, his position, his fears, his promises, his lies, his recklessness, his marriage, and his flight. However, though she could not defend him, she tried to share the odium of his crimes. "I knew it," she stammered, in a choking voice, "I knew it all."

M. Plantat was in despair. "How you love him, poor child!" murmured he.

This mournful remark gave Laurence back all her energy; rising to her feet, her eyes glittering with indignation; "I love him?" cried she. "I? Ah, I can explain my conduct to you, my only friend, for you are worthy of hearing the truth. Yes, I *did* love him, it is true—I loved him to forgetfulness of duty, to self-sacrifice even. But one day he showed himself to me as he really was; I judged him then, and my love did not survive my contempt. I was ignorant of Sauvresy's horrible death, though Hector confessed to me that his life and honour were in Bertha's hands—and that she loved him. I left him free to abandon me, to marry another, thus sacrificing more than my life to what I thought his happiness; yet I was not deceived. When I fled with him I once more sacrificed myself. When I saw that it was impossible to conceal my shame, I wanted to die. But I yielded to his prayers and lived; and wrote an infamous letter to my mother, because he pleaded with me in the name of my—of our child!" M. Lecoq, impatient at the loss of time, now tried to interpose; but Laurence would not listen to him. "But what does it matter?" she continued. "I loved him, followed him, and am his. Constancy is the only excuse for a fault like mine. I will do my duty. I cannot be innocent when Hector has committed a crime; I desire to suffer half the punishment."

She spoke with such remarkable animation that the detective was wondering how he could calm her, when two whistles in the street suddenly caught his ear. Trémorrel was returning, and there was not a moment to be lost. He caught hold of Laurence by the arm. "You will tell all this to the judges, madame," said he sternly. "My orders are only for M. de Trémorrel. Here is the warrant to arrest him."

He produced the warrant, and laid it on the table. Laurence, with wonderful force of will, had become almost calm. "You will let me speak five minutes with the Count de Trémorrel, will you not?" she asked.

M. Lecoq was delighted; he had expected this request. "Five minutes? Yes," he replied. "But don't hope to save the prisoner, madame; the house is watched; if you look into the courtyard and the street, you will see my men in ambush. Besides, I shall wait in the next room."

The count was now heard coming upstairs. "There's Hector!" cried Laurence, "quick, quick! conceal yourselves!" And as they retired, she

added in a low tone, but sufficiently audible for the detective to overhear her, "Be sure, we shall not try to escape."

She let the curtain hanging before the doorway that communicated with the adjoining room drop just in time. Hector now entered. He was intensely pale, and his eyes wandered with an expression of restless fear. "We are lost!" said he, "they are pursuing us. See, this letter which I received just now was not written by the man it professes to come from; he told me so himself. Come, let us go, let us leave this house—"

But Laurence overwhelmed him with a look of hatred and contempt. "It is too late," said she.

Her countenance and voice were so strange that Trémoré, despite his own distress, anxiously asked, "What is the matter?"

"Everything is discovered; it is known that you killed your wife."

"It's false!" But noting that she merely shrugged her shoulders,

"Well, yes, it is true," he added, "for I loved you so!"

"Really! And it was for love of me that you poisoned Sauvresy?"

He realised that he was detected, that he had been caught in a trap, that some one had come, in his absence, and told Laurence everything. So making no further attempt at denial, he merely cried, "What shall I do? what shall I do?"

Laurence drew him to her, and muttered in a trembling voice, "Save the name of Trémoré; there are pistols here."

He recoiled, as if he had seen death itself. "No," said he. "I can yet fly and conceal myself; I will go alone, and you can rejoin me afterwards."

"I have already told you that it is too late. The police have surrounded the house. And—you know—it is the galleys, or—the scaffold!"

"I can get away by the courtyard."

"It is guarded; look."

He ran to the window, perceived M. Lecoq's men, and drew back, his features distorted with terror. "I can at least try," said he, "by disguising myself—"

"Fool! A detective is in there, and it was he who left that warrant to arrest you on the table."

Hector saw that he was lost beyond hope. "Must I die, then?" he muttered.

"Yes, you must; but before you die write a confession of your crimes, for innocent people may be suspected—"

He sat down mechanically, took the pen which Laurence held out to him, and wrote: "Being about to appear before God, I declare that I alone, and without accomplices, poisoned Sauvresy and murdered the Countess de Trémoré, my wife." While he signed and dated this, Laurence opened the front drawer of the writing-table. Hector seized one of the brace of pistols lying in it, and she took the other. But just as Trémoré's heart had failed him that night now long ago at the hotel, and again in Sauvresy's bedroom, so it failed him now as soon as he felt the cold chill of the pistol on his forehead. He turned livid, his teeth chattered, and he trembled so violently that he let the pistol drop. "Laurence, my love," he stammered, "what will—become of you?"

"Me! I have sworn that I will follow you always and everywhere. Do you understand?"

"Ah, 'tis horrible!" he cried. "It was not I who poisoned Sauvresy—it was she—there are proofs of it; perhaps, with a good advocate—"

M. Lecoq was attentively watching this tragical scene, and at this mo-

ment, either purposely or by accident, he touched the door curtain, causing it to rustle. Laurence at once thought he was returning, and that Hector would fall alive into his hands. "Miserable coward!" she cried, pointing her pistol at her lover, "fire, or else—"

Still he hesitated; and then hearing another rustle at the door, she pressed the trigger—a loud report followed, and Trémorcel fell dead.

Bounding forward, Laurence rapidly picked up the other pistol, and was turning it against herself, when M. Lecoq sprang upon her and wrenched the weapon from her grasp. "Unhappy girl!" cried he, "what would you do?"

"Die! Can I live, now?"

"Yes, you can live," responded M. Lecoq. "And more, you ought to live."

"I am a lost woman—"

"No, you are a poor child, lured away by a scoundrel. You say you are very guilty; perhaps so; then live to repent. Great sorrows like yours have their mission in this world, one of devotion and charity. Live, and the good you do will attach you once more to life. You have yielded to a villain's deceitful promises; remember, when you are rich, that there are poor innocent girls forced to lead a life of miserable shame for a crust of bread. Go to those unhappy creatures, rescue them from shame, and their honour will be yours." M. Lecoq narrowly watched Laurence as he spoke, and perceived that he had touched her. Still, her eyes were dry, and gleamed with a strange fire. "Besides, your life is not your own—you know," he added.

"Ah," she rejoined, "I must die now, even for my child, for should I not die of shame when he asks me for his father—"

"You will answer him, madame, by showing him an honest man and an old friend, who is ready to give him his name—Monsieur Plantat."

The old magistrate was broken with grief; but he still had the strength to say, "Laurence, my poor darling, if you would only let me—"

These simple words, uttered so winningly and gently, at last melted the unhappy girl's heart. She burst into tears. She was saved.

Perceiving a shawl hanging on a chair, M. Lecoq hastily threw it over her shoulders, and passed her arm through M. Plantat's, saying to the latter, "Go, lead her away; my men have orders to let you pass, and Palot will lend you his cab."

"But where shall we go?"

"To Orcival; M. Courtois has been informed by a letter from me that his daughter is living, and he is expecting her. Come, lose no time."

M. Lecoq listened till he heard the vehicle rumble away, and then returned to Trémorcel's body. "There," said he to himself, "lies a wretch whom I've killed instead of arresting him and delivering him up to justice. Have I done my duty as an officer of the law? No; but my conscience will not reproach me, for I have acted rightly." And running to the staircase, he called his men.

XXVIII.

THE day after Trémorcel's death, old Bertaud and Guespin were set at liberty; the former received from M. Courtois four thousand francs to buy a boat and some new fishing tackle, and the latter ten thousand francs,

with a promise of a like sum at the end of the year, if he would go and live in his own province. A fortnight later, to the great surprise of the Orcival gossips, who were unacquainted with the particulars of these events, M. Plantat married Mademoiselle Laurence Courtois; and they started the same evening for Italy, where it was announced they would remain at least a year. As for Papa Courtois, he has offered his beautiful estate at Orcival for sale; he proposes to settle somewhere in Central France, and is on the look-out for a commune in need of a good mayor.

M. Lecoq, like everybody else, would no doubt have forgotten the Val-feuillu affair, had not a notary called on him the other morning with a very gracious letter from Laurence, and an enormous sheet of stamped paper. This was nothing less than a title-deed to M. Plantat's pretty estate at Orcival, "with furniture, stabling, carriage-house, garden, and other dependencies and appurtenances thereunto belonging," and some neighbouring acres of pleasant pasturage. "Prodigious!" exclaimed M. Lecoq, "I didn't help ingrates, after all! I *am* willing to become a landed proprietor, just for the rarity of the thing."

THE END.

PROMISE OF MARRIAGE.

I.

SOME twenty years ago Hector Malestrat was the "lion" of Bordeaux society. He was good-looking and a trifle conceited; he had sufficient money to satisfy his tastes, and a good tailor into the bargain; and he was not yet thirty years of age. The "gilded youth" of the Guienne capital admired his house, his horses, and his carriages. His servants' liveries were enviously copied, and his *châlet* at Arcachon had almost driven an eccentric Englishman mad with jealousy. In one word, fortune had emptied her strong box and presented him with the contents. Hector was the only son of an opulent shipowner, whose honesty was so exceptional that his name had become, as it were, the synonym of commercial integrity. Towards the close of M. Malestrat, senior's, career, and just as he was thinking of retiring from business to enjoy the fruits of his labour, he was overtaken by unforeseen misfortunes. Several English and Dutch firms, with which he was connected, unexpectedly failed: three of his own ships were lost at sea; and, there was an astonishing fall in the market value of claret. Another man would have blown his brains out, but M. Malestrat faced the storm, and thanks to his personal resources and his immense credit, succeeded in coping with all emergencies. Nevertheless, his means were greatly diminished, and there remained to him barely one hundred thousand francs a year, in lieu of four times that sum as formerly. This fall bitterly afflicted him, the more so as he had hitherto only known success, and, in addition, the death of his wife, who had been his partner and confidant for five-and-twenty years, caused him unspeakable sorrow. He bowed his head under this last blow, lingered for a year, and then died, regretting that he had not been able to repair what he called his disaster, and begging his son's pardon for having imprudently reduced him to "comparative poverty."

Thus at twenty-three years of age Hector found himself an orphan, with an income of considerable magnitude for a provincial *beau*. His father had asked him to carry on the firm, but after a little reflexion he decided that he was rich enough, the more so as his tastes were, after all, not of an inordinately expensive character. So he liquidated the business, sold the "clippers," shut up the office, and expressed his intention of amusing himself.

It must be admitted that he amused himself methodically. He allowed himself sixty thousand francs a year for his pleasures, and never once expended an additional ten napoleons. At Bordeaux such a sum was ample to ensure him a prominent position, and indeed he was skilful enough to win first honours. A daring love adventure in the highest society of the city served as his first stepping-stone, and this beginning was followed by

many other exploits in which he firmly established his claim to be considered irresistible among the fair sex. At the Grand Theatre he virtually laid down the law. He gave his opinion on each successive *prima donna* or *première danseuse*, and this opinion became that of the entire audience. Woe to the actress who resisted his advances! She was hissed and persecuted until she surrendered or took herself off; while such as proved less rebellious were rewarded with repeated calls before the curtain, with plaudits, and crowns and bouquets beyond number. To complete Hector's reputation, he fought two or three duels which resulted happily for himself, and not too much to the detriment of his adversaries. His bravery became notorious, and thus he found himself in some measure shielded against the ordinary slanders and backbiting of provincial life. Besides, folks feared his somewhat brutal wit, for, like all men of his character, he not merely did everything he chose, but said whatever he thought into the bargain. To vary the occupations we have mentioned, he also turned his attention to sport. He was a crack shot in the cover, and he had a great partiality for yachting, in a yacht of his own. Moreover, he was a good horseman, and had also broken his own cobs to harness. When he passed along one of the streets, folks would turn and look after him; and the little *grisettes*, so enticing in their coquettish caps, adorned with *ruches* of ribbon, almost damaged their eyes in straining them to contemplate this Bordeaux Don Juan. A murmur of admiration seemed to follow him. "There goes our M. Malestrat," the gossips would say with an air of self-congratulation; and provincial life, be it noted, can give no greater satisfaction to personal vanity. The most eminent men in France pass unnoticed among the crowd on the Paris boulevards. Those who even know the Baron de Rothschild by sight are few and far between.

Hector would no doubt have started a racing-stable, if he had not been warned by the example of a friend of his, who spent a million in trying to win a "plate" worth less than a thousand francs. This circumstance virtually saved him. As it was, gambling consumed a very large portion of the money he devoted to "pleasure." Gambling, indeed, enjoys high favour at Bordeaux, and after midnight all the clubs in the neighbourhood of the Grand Theatre are full of gamblers. The light glitters through the cracks of the shutters, closed by order of the police, and in the silence of the night the passer-by can hear the jingle of gold, passing from hand to hand or falling on to the *tapis vert*. It seems as if luck were anxious to tempt the belated wayfarer, and had inscribed above the portals of the houses "Come in and win." But then it is quite as easy to lose. However, to return to Hector. Great as was his supremacy in this frivolous world, it must not be supposed that it was altogether unquestioned. Some even said that he was a miser, whilst others pronounced him to be a prodigal. Those who had plucked him at baccarat opined, moreover, that he was a terrible gambler. Those whom he was in the habit of inviting to supper underrated his cellar and slandered his cook. And certain fair daughters of Eve, who had failed to ensnare him, tore his reputation to pieces with all the strength of their false teeth. But then, on the other hand, he had in his favour the charming squadron of marriageable young ladies—for was he not said to be so dangerous?—and the estimable battalion of mammas with grown-up daughters—for it was reported he didn't look for a dowry. And in addition he could count on those who were in the habit of borrowing money from him—altogether very respectable forces. Liberally endowed with friends and enemies, flatterers and slanderers, he

could thus boast of all the advantages and drawbacks which invariably attend admitted superiority.

And yet this happy man was bored. Like many of his fellows he was worth more than his reputation. He had done a great many foolish things, but he had never thrown his heart into these exploits. He had originally been flattered and amused with the idea of becoming a man of fashion ; and when he had attained this position, he fancied that honour required he should maintain it. He would have liked to have had an object in life, but how was he to find one ? Habit, which is second nature, false shame, and a want of self-reliance deterred him from even venturing on such a search. What could he do at his age—return to business ? But then he must absorb himself in money-making, and he considered himself rich enough already. No doubt he ought to have resolutely set to work—but on what ? And besides, what would Bordeaux have said. Brave enough when he grasped a sword, he positively felt a coward in face of public opinion, to which he was personally so much indebted. His irresolution undoubtedly made him blush, but he was powerless to conquer it ; for although he had some little contempt for his boon companions, he was terrified by the idea of their twitting him. This was not surprising, for in lieu of living for himself, he had hitherto lived for others, as he very well realised to his own exasperation. Taking the past as the criterion of the future, he felt quite sick at heart, and yet he came to no decision. The truth is, he was tired of this purposeless life, as uninteresting as a queen's speech, and more monotonous than the evolutions of a pendulum. "Always the same thing, always the same thing," he would mutter, night after night, on returning home, with dreary eyes and yawning mouth. Ah ! if his friends had only seen him ! But he carefully concealed this crushing spleen, which no one as much as suspected, not even his own *valet de chambre*.

At last one morning an inspiration came to him, and he truly believed that it had reached him from on high. "Suppose I put an end to all this," he murmured ; "why not think of marrying ?" He adopted that inspiration on the spot, and decided, there and then, that he would get married within the next three months. He did not pause to reflect over the exigencies and worries of matrimonial life. He did not even ask himself, "Shall I be happy or unhappy ?" No, he simply said, "I've had quite enough of a bachelor's life. Matrimony will be a change." And building his castle in the air, he added, "My wife will be pretty, witty, and wealthy. We shall have the first establishment in Bordeaux. She will do the honours of her drawing-room to perfection ; we shall receive a great many guests, and I shall be the most envied and consequently the happiest of men." In short, after living for the world he was going to marry for the world. Always the same folly.

When he acquainted his friends at the club with his new-born determination they looked at him in amazement. What an idea ! to think of Malestrat putting the rope round his neck before he was even thirty years of age. Some of his more intimate companions complained to each other of his reticence in not consulting them. Others were seriously affected by the news, rightly opining that his purse strings, loose enough now that he was a bachelor, would speedily tighten when he became a married man. After all, the great question was, who did he mean to marry ? All the widows and spinsters of the town were passed in review, and curiosity reached its height, the more so as no one could even guess who the future Madame Malestrat might be. At last, it was decided that he must be carrying on

some mysterious love intrigue which no one knew anything about. In point of fact, however, there was no love at all in the matter. Hector had simply been designated, some seventeen years previously, as the future husband of Mademoiselle Aurélie Blandureau, a young lady who lived with her parents in the vicinity of Paris, and whose existence even was unknown to his friends.

Many years previously, when M. Malestrat, senior, had begun business in a small way, he had had a partner, M. Blandureau, who, however, soon grew tired of the connection. He did not understand much about shipping, and he found that wealth could not be rapidly acquired at Bordeaux. So one day he bid his partner good-bye, and went to Paris, where he started a commission business—and procured himself a wife. He was successful both in trade and matrimony, and had already amassed more than half-a-million francs, when his wife presented him with a little girl. M. Malestrat, with whom M. Blandureau still kept on friendly terms, was asked to stand as godfather to the child, and he accordingly started for Paris with his son, Hector, who was then some ten years old. On the evening of the christening, after a copious repast, Blandureau and Malestrat swore across the wainuts and the wine that their children should marry each other when they were “grown up.” There was no formal engagement in writing, but each had such a high opinion of his friend’s word that the matter was looked upon as quite as irrevocably settled, as if the two youngsters had already plighted their troth before the altar. Whenever M. Blandureau wrote to Bordeaux, he invariably asked after his daughter’s husband, and M. Malestrat, in reply, always inquired after his son’s wife. Hector, on his side, had always heard of this affair as a decided thing. His opinion had never been asked for ; all he knew was that the marriage would take place when Mademoiselle Blandureau reached her eighteenth birthday. It is true, that at the epoch of M. Malestrat, senior’s, reverses, the shipper had written to his friend Blandureau, explaining his altered position, and suggesting that it would perhaps only be right to modify the old engagement. But M. Blandureau nobly replied by return of post, “What is done is done. My daughter will have a dowry of fifteen hundred thousand francs. I don’t care a fig for money. Even if your son shouldn’t have a *sou*, remember that my word will always hold good.”

On his father’s death, Hector had virtually ratified the engagement. He corresponded frequently with M. Blandureau, and twice a year—on New Year’s eve, and the day preceding the feast of St. Aurélie—he invariably despatched a case full of presents to his intended and her family. To his mind it was altogether a question of commercial integrity ; his father had given his word and it must not be broken. It is true that he knew nothing of Mademoiselle Blandureau, except that her Christian name was Aurélie, that she was tall and dark, and had been brought up at that renowned educational establishment for young ladies, the Convent of the Sacred Heart, in the Faubourg St. Germain. Perhaps he considered this last circumstance as a sufficient guarantee.

II.

HECTOR, having decided to meet and honour the verbal draft, which his father had drawn in his name on the future, next determined to prevent all possible retreat by following the Grecian example : he literally burnt his

ships. He wrote to his future father-in-law to inform him "that at the end of next September he would call upon him to remind him of an engagement dear to both of them ;" and scarcely had he posted this letter than he at once began his preparations for leaving Bordeaux. As he intended to return to the city in his wife's company, he now put a stop to all ephemeral connections, and carefully burnt everything that would have reminded him of his past life. Faded ribbons and withered flowers, microscopical miniatures and dainty rings, silky curls of hair of every shade, effusive letters, impregnated with the scent of violets or verbenas—one and all were ruthlessly consigned to the flames. When nought remained but a pile of ashes, he heaved a sigh of satisfaction : "Well, that's over," said he, "I am free now ; I am another man." On the morrow he sent for his upholsterer, instructed him to change all the furniture of the house during his absence, and arranged with a master-painter to re-decorate the mansion from garret to basement. By this means he voluntarily turned himself out of doors.

It was the end of June, when, after innumerable leave takings, Hector was at last able to start for Geneva. He considered that a little tour in Switzerland was the proper kind of preface for a course of married life, and he had still three months to dispose of before meeting his intended. He was glad to have a little time before him, so as to be able to reflect over the coming change in his condition, and fittingly prepare for it. It was necessary he should assume the grave air of a future paterfamilias, and this cannot be acquired in one day. With the view of facilitating the transformation he had ordered his tailor to make him several simple suits of clothes of a puritanical cut, and adapting his demeanour to his garments he had become an altered man at the end of his first month of probation. Several times he fancied that he was already married, and indeed had been so for several years past, and he adopted such a paternal air when speaking to young folks, that it might really have been imagined he was a father. However, at the end of a six weeks' tour through Switzerland, he had virtually seen nothing. The fact is, he did not look at anything, and indeed his eyes seemed elsewhere, like his mind. Somehow or other, his imagination had gained the upper hand. Originally, he had not at all felt in a hurry to set his eyes on Mademoiselle Blandureau, and yet now he was literally devoured with impatience. He not merely counted the days that must elapse before his appointment became due, but even the hours. The Great Unknown had a powerful attraction for him ; and he actually sighed for Mademoiselle Aurélie without in the least degree thinking himself ridiculous.

Matters at last came to such a pass, that one morning at the end of August, he unexpectedly woke up at Tours, within six hours' rail of Paris. How had this happened ? He asked himself this very question as soon as reason returned to him. In point of fact, he longed to meet his intended ; dreaming indeed of her father's house as the Israelites dreamed of the promised land. And to think that he need only go to the railway station, take a ticket, and jump into a train, to be at Aurélie's side that very evening. What a temptation ! But, then ; would it be proper to present himself in this unexpected fashion ? Would not such a course be looked upon as evincing a want of taste and confidence on his part ? In business, exactitude does not consist in being ready a fortnight beforehand, but in keeping one's engagements on the appointed day. He thought of all this, and succeeded by a great effort in curbing his impatience, and deciding to wait. But then, what was he to do alone at Tours during four long weeks ? He had to choose between two alternatives. He might either retrace his steps, or

profit of his remaining days of liberty to study Parisian life, incognito. Strange as it may seem, Hector was unacquainted with Paris. He had only been there once as a child, and since reaching manhood, he had always refrained from journeying to the great city. What he dreaded was disenchantment on his return. After six months' lounging about the Boulevard des Italiens, how would he ever have reconciled himself to the Fossés de l'Intendance at Bordeaux? His birthplace would have seemed small and humble, and constant thoughts of Paris would have imbittered his career; and besides, following Montaigne's example, he preferred being the first in his own city, to being the second in the metropolis. Now, on the eve of his marriage, he instinctively dreaded Paris. His conversion to serious life was so recent, and he knew that all the temptations of St. Antony would at once assail him, if he as much as ventured to set his foot on the boulevards. Still, on the other hand, he scarcely cared for the part of a peripatetic lover; he had wandered through Switzerland enough already. After spending a long time in deliberation, he was quite at a loss what to do with himself, when appropriately enough he remembered that one of the friends of his youthful days now resided somewhere on the banks of the Loire, between Tours and Blois. This friend had often come to see him at Bordeaux, and had repeatedly begged him to return his visits, which Hector had always promised to do; but unfortunately something or other had invariably occurred to prevent him from keeping his word. Now, however, he joyfully remembered his friend, and was delighted with the idea of beguiling time in his society. So as soon as he was dressed he hastened downstairs to ask his landlord if he were acquainted with his friend's address. It so happens that every one at Tours has heard of M. Ferdinand Aubanel, who lives on a pretty estate called La Fresnaie, at a distance of five short leagues from the city. La Fresnaie was indeed described to Hector in such glowing terms that he decided it must be a *château*; and then having nothing more to learn, he hired a fly, and set off, remarking to himself, "There is nothing like having a friend in every part of the world."

III.

THE vehicle covered the ground at a jog-trot. The driver dozed on the box, and Hector, leaning back inside and cradled, so to say, by the monotonous motions of the springs, gazed dreamily at the tranquil scenery of Touraine, quite unconscious whether he were travelling fast or slow. The landscape was picturesquely diversified. At times the road skirted the brow of a wooded hill, and overlooked the Loire, and at others it wound, with serpentine curves, down into some cool valley girt round about with sloping vineyards. At length the driver considerably woke up, and turning his skinny horses into a side road, exclaimed, "We are getting near, sir." There were indeed ample signs of the proximity of some manorial dwelling-house. The hedges were well trimmed, the ditches properly banked up, and the trees pruned so as to afford shade without fostering dampness on the roadway. Two farms hidden like nests among copses of young elms were passed in turn, and further off above the tree tops the conical roof of a pigeon-house could be discerned. Some mowers were at work in a neighbouring meadow, and the air was balmy with the scent of new made hay. A little beyond, several thorough-breds were grazing in a carefully secured enclosure, and by-and-bye at the end of a long, long

avenue of chestnut trees, M. Aubanel's house appeared to view. It was not properly speaking a *château*, but one of those unpretentious, though massive country houses, formed of a central building with advanced wings, and which seem to have "hospitality" written above their gates: an entire storey being not, unfrequently, solely devoted to guest chambers. A servant stood at the iron gate, and shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand, watched the approaching vehicle as if it conveyed some expected visitor. "What a nuisance," thought Hector; "some one is evidently expected, and perhaps I shall be in the way." But as the fly drew nearer to the house he recognised the servant as the same who had accompanied his friend Ferdinand when the latter visited Bordeaux. And the servant seemed to recognise him in turn, for he had already taken off his cap, and was telegraphing incomprehensible signals. At length the vehicle drew up in the court-yard, and the valet eagerly exclaimed: "Ah! sir, you've come at last. My master was expecting you most impatiently."

Hector was about to express the wonder these words caused him when he felt himself caught by the arm, and on turning round, found himself faced by his friend in person. "Ah, thanks, thanks," exclaimed Ferdinand Aubanel. "You are a true friend. I knew you would come, and I see that on receiving my letter, you must have started immediately."

"Why, my dear fellow, I left Bordeaux two months ago, and I haven't received any letter at all from you. Chance alone—"

"Chance, eh? Well, let us bless it! And besides, chance will be at my orders in future. Ah, you don't know yet, but let me tell you—I am the happiest man on earth. Yes, indeed, so happy that I fear I shall go mad with joy. But come, come, I mustn't leave you standing here. Come in doors. Ah! I need your advice. Come, but first would you like to take some refreshment?" And then in the same incoherent fashion, Ferdinand, whom Hector scarcely fancied in his senses, summoned all his servants in turn, gave them twenty contradictory orders, and set the whole house in motion. But in the meanwhile, he never once let go off Hector's arm, which he pressed against his own as if he were afraid that his friend might escape him. And now dragging him across the hall, up the stairs, and along the passages, he resumed, still in the same singular, broken fashion, "If I wrote, it is because I want you to sign my contract. I want you to be my best man. I am going to be married, my dear fellow; yes, married! A young girl—no, I mean an angel, so beautiful, so beautiful! You shall see her—I love her—I worship her. And the day after to-morrow she will be mine. At times I almost fancy it's a dream. Yes, the day after to-morrow! Ah, how long to wait! And she loves me; yes, old chap; she has told me so, and she will repeat it to you, if you only ask her. Her name is Herminie. By-and-bye we'll climb to the loft, and you shall see where she lives. You shall see her, herself, this evening, but come, come—"

"It's quite an epidemic," thought Hector; "everyone wants to get married. Well, I've done right to warn my future father-in-law. Perhaps there wouldn't have been a wife left for me, if I had waited. Ah, my dear father, how I admire your foresight."

In the meanwhile Ferdinand had opened the door of a room on the first floor. "Come in," said he; "this is my bachelor's room. It won't long be tenanted! We are to have a room of our own hardby. The upholsterers are just putting the finishing touches. It will be perfect, quite a nest in lilac satin! But excuse me, wait—take care—I must find you a chair."

He had some difficulty in doing so, for this bachelor's room was in a state of overwhelming confusion ; everything was encumbered—the bed, the drawers, the table, and the chairs. Two huge cases, which had just been opened, occupied most of the space usually left vacant ; the remainder being littered with the boards which had covered the cases and the tools which had served to open them. Near the window stood a well-dressed man who held a yard tape in his hand, and who bowed most respectfully as the two friends entered. "My tailor," exclaimed Ferdinand ; "he has arrived from Paris with these two cases full of clothes. During the last month he has only been working for me."

"What ! do you mean to try on all these things ?"

"Of course I do, and mind you, I want your advice. Aren't you one of the kings of fashion ?" While speaking, Ferdinand divested himself of his coat and waistcoat, and prepared for the ordeal. Ah, it was a singular sight. M. Aubanel was ever complaining. Nothing seemed to suit him, and he did not merely complain of the clothes, but also of his own physical imperfections. He wished to look distinguished, and in his overwhelming anxiety he fancied that he looked grotesque. The tailor, of course, was all satisfaction. He answered each fresh complaint by declaring that the disparaged garment fitted his customer to a T, and whenever Ferdinand questioned his own physique, he flatteringly proclaimed that he had never before had the honour of dressing such an admirably proportioned gentleman as M. Aubanel. Hector was of course appealed to by either side, but as he wished to get the business over, he almost invariably decided in the tailor's favour.

At last the latter was free to retire, and then it became necessary for Hector to give his opinion on the marriage *corbeille* which stood on the table in the grand drawing-room. The *corbeille*, so called by custom, was not in this case a basket, but a superb rose wood chest, adorned with incrustations in rare woods of the Indies, and having a richly wrought silver lock and handles. Hector greatly admired it, and mentally decided to buy something of the same kind for Mademoiselle Blandureau, but Ferdinand declared that he was not satisfied, for he found it a great deal too small. At first Hector started back in surprise, but on glancing round the room he realised the truth of his friend's statement. For on every side there was some marvel to admire—cashmere shawls, and yards upon yards of lace, silks and satins, jewels and jewel caskets, gloves and glove boxes, fans and opera glasses, every kind of knick-knack that a woman might take a fancy to, and the whole representing a very considerable sum of money indeed. "My aunt and I spent a fortnight buying all these things," said Ferdinand.

"What, she lent a hand in such prodigality ? Have you become a king, then, or do you mean to ruin yourself ?"

"Ruin myself ! oh, that's impossible. Before I knew Herminie I tried to do so three times, but on each occasion as soon as I began trifling with my capital, a relative died and left me a fresh fortune. The money I've spent on these presents cost me nothing ; it came from one of my uncles. It's true I've spent the whole of what he left me, but that's not too much to repay one of Herminie's smiles. My only worry is that the *corbeille* will be too small. But, after all, that's my aunt's affair. She will be here early to-morrow morning ; for in the afternoon I must send it to Herminie. Now let's go to dinner."

"I wasn't mistaken," thought Hector ; "the poor fellow has fairly lost his head." Whether this was true or not Ferdinand's stomach certainly

seemed to be in the right place. He eat enough for four men of decent appetites, and contrived to talk the whole while. But scarcely had he swallowed his last mouthful than he precipitately rose from table and dragged Hector away. "I am going to visit my intended," he said. "This will make my third visit to-day. You see I must introduce you—you are my best friend, and I've spoken of you so often that they are all anxiety to see you. It's only half a league off, and if you like we'll walk. To tell the truth, I feel I need fresh air and locomotion."

As they followed the road which leads from La Fresnaie to Cormes-Ecluse, where Mademoiselle Herminie's family resided, Hector noticed that his friend's gaiety gradually waned, and when at last they entered the drawing-room he had become all anxiety and nervousness. With flushed cheeks and a wavering glance he just managed to stammer out an introduction, and Hector could not help muttering to himself, "The deuce! it seems that it's serious." At the same time he glanced in the direction of Mademoiselle Herminie, who, after turning as red as a peony, just rose from her seat to make a timid little courtesy, and then pretended to devote all her attention to some embroidery she held in her hand. However, Hector noticed that her hands trembled so acutely that she could scarcely direct her needle, and then although she had bent her head over her work, he was able to surprise the glance she darted at Ferdinand. All her soul had passed in that soft, moist glance, full of innocent confessions and candid promises. "She loves him," said Hector to himself; "well, so much the better, for he's a good fellow and he deserves it." And then, whilst Ferdinand approached his lady love, he engaged in conversation with her father and mother, talking of all kinds of indifferent things, of Switzerland, which he had scarcely seen, and of Bordeaux, with which of course he was well acquainted. At times when he paused in his talk he could hear the whispers of the lovers, seated near the work table so close to each other, that at moments their hair mingled. The whole house was in motion. In an adjoining room several seamstresses were completing the trousseau, and in the kitchen and the pantry preparations were being made for the grand dinner, to be given on the following day, prior to the signing of the contract.

When Hector and Ferdinand returned to La Fresnaie that evening, the former was ushered into one of those lofty, spacious country bedrooms where a man can breathe and move. After living for a couple of months in uncomfortable hotels, he was naturally delighted with the change, and promised himself a good night's rest; but he had not thought of Ferdinand. Scarcely was he between the sheets than M. Aubanel appeared in his dressing-gown, and unceremoniously seated himself on the bed. He had a thousand important things to tell his friend, at least so he pretended; thereupon launching forth the most extravagant remarks which often made Hector laugh, though from time to time he ventured to plead in favour of rest and sleep. But Ferdinand had always something more to say, and it was already five o'clock when, springing out of bed, Hector was at last able to get rid of his friend by the employment of a little personal violence. It was, however, too late to think of repose, for the rest of the house was already astir. A new carriage—to be used at the wedding for the first time—had just arrived, and the stable men were running and shouting across the courtyard. In the passages there was a clattering of wooden shoes, the ordinary servant girls having been reinforced for the occasion by all the available peasant women living on the estate. Then the *glacier* and pastry-cook

arrived from Tours with his tin and copper molds, pans and pails, and other sonorous utensils, which clanged and jingled like the cracked chimes of the village church. The old staircase groaned under the weight of an army of work people; upholsterers were hanging velvet-backed benches round an improvised ball-room, and there was a din of hammering as they nailed the hangings to the walls. Soon above the tumult Ferdinand's loud voice could be heard, calling everybody at once, men and women alike, so that well-nigh every name in the calendar in turn escaped his lips. His aunt, old Mademoiselle Aubanel, had just arrived, and Hector now took an heroic resolution. He sprang out of bed, hastily dressed, and went downstairs. Ferdinand was decidedly losing his wits and sadly needed a substitute, so that Hector offered to act as Mademoiselle Aubanel's aide-de-camp, and under her orders proceeded to control the undisciplined army of servants and work people. As for M. Aubanel, his aunt suggested that he had better go and visit his intended, and he did not ask her to repeat her advice. At length under the joint control of the old lady and Hector all the preparations were completed, and then it was necessary for them to hurry in their turn to Cormes-Ecluse, where the "contract dinner" was waiting.

It was one of those copious repasts for which Touraine is so famous. The table almost staggered under the weight of the dishes, bottles, and glasses. There was thirty-eight diners ranged round the board, and fully sixty dishes were served. Every one knew each other, and indeed every one was more or less nearly related to his neighbour. Hector was indeed the only stranger, but then Ferdinand had sounded his praises so highly, their intimacy was so apparent, and the old aunt darted her aide-de-camp such grateful looks, that he was at once treated as one of the family. An old cousin parodied the Count d'Artois' famous saying, and exclaimed, "There is only a relative the more," whereupon everybody laughed. That evening, indeed, the least thing seemed to provoke merriment. Hector was witty, or at least he appeared so, which is the more important point, and he contrived to keep every one in such good humour that Ferdinand at times turned his eyes away from his inamorata to smile his thanks across the table. At the end of the repast, two elderly gentlemen, solemnly attired in black, and with very stiff shirt collars, abruptly rose to their feet, and without a word passed into the drawing-room. "Those gentlemen are the notaries," said a lady, seated beside Hector, in answer to his inquiries. Every one at once followed the representatives of the law. A number of chairs had already been disposed in a circle round the reception-room, where on the central table stood a heavy silver gilt inkstand, flanked by several immaculate quill-pens. The elder of the two notaries, who had assumed his gold spectacles, remained standing, holding the marriage contract in his hand. The silence was so profound that on listening attentively one might have heard the bridegroom's heart beating. At last when every one was seated the perusal of the contract began. In a monotonous voice the old notary enumerated the surnames and christian names of the affianced pair, and the various clauses and conditions, slurring over the technical terms, and losing himself at times in the midst of the interminable phrases. The old cousin, who was of an apoplectic temperament, grumbled between his teeth. Such an ordeal after a dinner necessitating a laborious digestion was hard to bear indeed. Hector on his side almost dozed off to sleep, whilst Ferdinand twitched and turned on his chair like Guatimozin on his gridiron. At last the perusal came to an end, the notary laid the contract on the table, and the interested parties rose to their feet, ready to sign it.

Hector, who was but half awake, followed the general example. He was waiting for his turn, glancing carelessly round the room, when all of a sudden his eyes lighted on the table, and he started with surprise, for the pen at that moment was held by such a beautiful, dainty, feminine hand that he thought he had never seen such a perfect one before. It was so admirably proportioned, this tiny white hand, with tapering fingers and rosy nails, and beneath the transparent skin, of the finest texture, one could follow the course of the pale blue veins. Hector was so struck that he instinctively elbowed his way past the people in front of him, so as to ascertain who it was that possessed this admirable hand. "Unfortunately," he muttered, "only a woman of thirty-five could have such a one as that." But he was mistaken, for it belonged to a young girl, barely eighteen years old, and so poetically beautiful that even a prosy stock-broker might have developed lyric faculties at mere sight of her. Her hair was of that warm, luminous, golden hue which the Titian had so marvellously rendered in his portraits of Venetian beauties. Unpretentiously caught up, and scarcely secured at all by a simple tortoise-shell comb, these wavy, golden locks were so flexible and so abundant, that at each moment it seemed as if they would free themselves, uncoil and spread like some gorgeous mantle over their possessor's shoulders—shoulders, the dainty curves of which could be divined under a pretty "*guimpe à la vierge*," finished round the neck with a *ruche* of lace. "Why, where can I have had my eyes," muttered Hector, "not to have noticed such a charming girl as that?" And lost in ecstasy, he did not hear the notary inviting him to take the pen and sign the contract in his turn.

As soon as this part of the ceremony was over, the whole party started for the village *mairie*, only a few hundred yards distant. Hector offered his arm to old Mademoiselle Aubanel, and quite regardless of her age and infirmities drew her along, almost at a run, for he was so anxious to overtake the beautiful girl with the golden hair. When he and Ferdinand's aunt reached the *mairie* she was already there, leaning on the old cousin's arm in an easy, graceful manner, and evidently quite unconscious of her own fascinating loveliness. The old cousin was talking, and she smiled as she listened to him. Innocent maliciousness sparkled in her big blue eyes, and at some remark more amusing than the others, she burst out laughing, so that her rosy lips parted and disclosed her glistening pearly teeth. That night, although Hector was not disturbed by Ferdinand, he had some difficulty in getting to sleep, for do what he would, his mind was haunted by a celestial vision. "Ah," he murmured, "if Mademoiselle Aurélie could only be like her."

The morrow was the great day. At eleven o'clock a dozen large open carriages came to convey the guests to the church. The coachmen wore large nosegays with streamers of white ribbon on their chests, and the horses were bedecked with favours and flowers like the sheep of the Midsummer-day's procession. The weather was splendid: it seemed as if the sun itself wished to participate in the rejoicings. Groups of peasants were waiting all along the road, and the men waved their hats and the women their handkerchiefs as the vehicles passed before them. The marriage mass had been celebrated, and Ferdinand and his young wife were standing under the church porch, just about to get into their carriage again, when Hector approached, and abruptly asked his friend who was that pretty girl with the golden hair. "Oh, one of our neighbours," carelessly replied the happy bridegroom, and stretching out his arm towards the horizon, he added,

"Her mother lives in the little château you can see over yonder, half-way up the slope, like a white dot in the midst of the trees." This did not tell Hector her name, but it happened that she was Mademoiselle Aubanel's bridesmaid (*demoiselle d'honneur*), so that custom made him her *cavaliere servente* for the rest of the day. Blithe and gay she hung on his arm, chirruping like the birds in the trees; and while they followed their friends along the garden pathways, and through the arbours, Hector had to tell her the history of his friendship for Ferdinand, and how he had decided to come. Her questions fully revealed her girlish innocence, and once or twice Hector was so surprised that he could not conceal it. Then her big tremulous eyes would gaze at him questioningly; but soon she recovered her careless serenity, while he rejoiced that she had furnished him with such an easy topic of conversation; for otherwise he would scarcely have known what to say to her. Addressed to *her*, the ordinary platitudes of "society" conversation would, indeed, have seemed singularly out of place. At times, whilst still listening to Hector, she stooped to pluck a flower, and leant, in doing so, more heavily on his arm; and then he paused in his talk to admire the exquisite grace and suppleness of her movements. By-and-bye, her charming toilette of white *crêpe de Chine* caught in a straggling briar, and with a laugh she stooped again to free herself, though not without pricking her fingers, which she at once carried to her mouth, and nibbled, as it were, with her tiny pearly teeth. Surprised, entranced, Hector abandoned himself to the irresistible charm of innocence, without even thinking of analysing the new sensations that pervaded him. Seated near her at dinner, he inwardly cursed every one who spoke to him, and compelled him to reply, preferring by far to watch her stealthily, while she daintily handled her knife and fork, or timidly dipped her lips in the ruby wine, served in gossamer glasses.

Precisely at six o'clock, it was still broad daylight, a scraping of violins was heard. This was the signal for the ball to begin in the arbour, and by-and-bye it was to be continued in the drawing-room. At the first twang of the strings she rose, and Hector followed her on to the sward. He danced all night, just like a youth fresh from college, wiping the perspiration from his forehead after each quadrille, and stretching out both hands towards the refreshment trays. Waltzes, polkas, and mazurkas always found him in the front rank, and at last old Mademoiselle Aubanel was fain to compliment him. But he did not hear her. He was listening at that moment to the voice of prudence which whispered, "You cannot properly dance with her, more than one dance out of every five." And to secure that privilege, he determined to dance in turn with every woman present. It mattered little whether they were young or old, pretty or ugly, he was full of attentions for them all; wit and flattery falling from his lips at every turn in the mazy-dance. He had never felt so satisfied in his life, and perhaps he imagined that the ball would last till the day of judgment, for he had made engagements as far ahead as the thirty-seventh quadrille! But suddenly, just as three o'clock in the morning was striking, it was noticed that the bride had disappeared, and the guests at once took this as a signal for departure, all the old cousin's efforts to organise a *cotillon*, meeting with no success. Hector offered his arm to the lovely girl with the golden hair, conducted her back to her mother, and escorted them both towards their carriage through the hall, which was crowded with guests looking for shawls and wrappers. "How early we are leaving, mamma," *she* said with a little pout.

"Oh, quick, quick, my dear," rejoined the old lady, giving no direct reply; "cover your neck and arms and shoulders. It is very cold outside, and you mustn't be imprudent. Quick, wrap yourself up in this shawl, and this cloak, and this scarf, and put this hood on your head."

The young bridesmaid laughingly allowed Hector to assist her in donning the many things her mother recommended, and then, swathed from head to foot like a mummy, she could hardly walk, so that he had almost to carry her to the carriage. He spread a heavy fur rug over both ladies, and fittingly received their thanks; the coachman touched up his horses, and a moment afterwards the vehicle was dashing down the long avenue of chestnut trees. There stood Hector on the steps, surprised and saddened like a sleeper, abruptly awakened from some happy dream. He had noticed that *her* carriage had brighter lamps than the others, and as long as possible he watched their light flashing along the winding road. At times it would disappear behind the trees, and then, just for a moment, suddenly shine forth again, across some open space, like a will o' the wisp darting through the marshes. At last, from where he stood he could see the lamps no longer, but hoping to perceive them from the drawing-room, he hastily went indoors, and with his forehead against the window panes, looked out, long and anxiously, into the night. The drawing-room was now void of guests; the rumbling of the last departing vehicles could be heard dying away in the distance; and the tired servants dragged themselves through the house turning out the lamps and extinguishing the tapers. Hector had just decided to retire to his own quarters, when Ferdinand darted like a whirlwind across the apartment. Catching hold of him by the arm, Hector eagerly asked, "Her name, tell me her name."

"Her name?" ejaculated the bridegroom. "Whose name? My wife's? Why, haven't I told you—Herminie."

"Oh, I don't mean your wife," rejoined Hector, but he had no opportunity of insisting, for Ferdinand had already freed himself, and was gone.

IV.

HER name was Louise d'Ambleçay, and she was but seventeen years old. Her mother, the Baroness d'Ambleçay, had suddenly become a widow after a brief but happy married life. Still young, wealthy, and decided not to marry again, the baroness had not found the courage to separate herself from her only daughter, whom she preferred to educate at home. She was assisted in her task by a learned old priest, and an able English governess of the Catholic faith, both of whom still reside at the Château d'Ambleçay, where they indeed will probably spend the remainder of their days. Thanks to her mother's plan, Louise did not go either to school or convent, where the atmosphere is so often fatal to young girls; and, brought up under her mother's eyes, she had thus retained all that girlish innocence and grace, which for many of us have even greater charm than beauty itself. Madame d'Ambleçay lived in almost complete retirement. On her husband's death she had shut herself up in her chateau so as to allow her grief full course; and later on, when time had dried her tears, she had been unwilling to change her mode of life. Still she received some of her relatives who lived at Tours, and who came once a year to spend a fortnight at the chateau, and she was, moreover, on visiting terms with four or five families of the neighbourhood belonging to the aristocracy or landed gentry. Girls marry

very early in Touraine, and for the past year the gossips of the district had been asking each other how it happened that Madame d'Ambleçay did not occupy herself with finding a husband for her daughter ; and one or two indiscreet chatters had even spoken on the subject to the baroness herself. Madame d'Ambleçay invariably replied that there was no reason to hurry, whereupon it was charitably reported that she was sacrificing Louise to her maternal egotism, sequestering her in fact, so as to make her an old maid in spite of herself.

Hector learnt all these particulars, and many others besides, from his friend's wife. Madame Aubanel was precisely Louise's best, and indeed her only friend, and Hector unconsciously made her his *confidante*. Whenever she was alone he profited of the opportunity to talk with her on the subject nearest to his heart, and even when Ferdinand was present he invariably offered her his arm, and monopolised the conversation to his own particular benefit. On all possible occasions, indeed, he fairly robbed his friend of his wife, considering that Ferdinand was most ridiculous with his "honey-moon" gallantry. However, although he always had Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay's name on his lips, he endeavoured in speaking of her to assume an air of utter indifference, and he really thought he succeeded in his efforts ; but if he had been less pre-occupied he might have noticed the shy smile that often played round young Madame Aubanel's lips. She thought that she could read his heart. But how could that be, since he could not read it himself—at least during the earlier days. He dissimulated in all good faith, and was the first to be deceived. If he still lingered at La Fresnaie it was because he really could not do otherwise. He peremptorily decided that point ; and indeed there was any number of pretexts and good reasons for him to remain. In Touraine no marriage takes place without "return" festivities. Relatives and friends vie with each other in entertaining the happy pair, and for a whole fortnight there is a perpetual turning of spits and scraping of violins ; dinners and balls, picnics and excursions, following each other with bewildering rapidity. Now could Hector refuse the invitations which rained upon him ? Would he not have offended his friend by doing so ? Thus he went everywhere, and on each fresh occasion he met Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, whose mother, making a great exception in favour of the recent marriage—Herminie, be it remembered had been Louise's only friend—momentarily abandoned her life of retirement.

If Hector had still been in the enjoyment of his calm, sober senses, he would certainly have noticed the singular change in Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay's character and manner. She, who on the occasion of their first meeting had been so gay and expensive, now grew more and more reserved. As they became better acquainted the more it seemed as if he intimidated her. Still he did not remark it, "Don Juan" though he was, with pretensions to great knowledge of the feminine heart. But then the most expert gallant loses his wits as soon as he is really in love. However, days and days elapsed, and every night Hector strapped up his portmanteau, to unstrap it again on the following morning. He cursed himself for being so weak. He considered himself both obnoxious and ridiculous ; for what on earth was he doing at La Fresnaie, troubling his friend's honeymoon, and preventing by his presence many a charming *tête-à-tête*. At times he felt remorseful and thought : "Poor Ferdinand must be disgusted with me. If I were in his place I should have turned my friend Hector out of doors long ago."

But Ferdinand had never had any such idea. On the contrary his friend's presence delighted him, and he considered himself the happiest

man on earth, to be able to spend his life between love and friendship. He was, moreover, so wrapped up in his own bliss that a hundred years might have elapsed without his noticing Hector's perplexity, if his wife had not appropriately warned him. It happened one morning while the happy pair were breakfasting together. Hector had gone off at daybreak, under the pretext of bagging a few partridges, but in reality to roam around Madame d'Ambleçay's château. In the course of conversation Ferdinand began to sing the praises of that friend of his—a perfect phoenix, he declared, who was neglecting all his own affairs to give them several weeks of his delightful society. "But are you sure, dear," asked Madame Aubanel "that it is only M. Malestrat's friendship for us that still keeps him at La Fresnaie?"

"Why, of course," replied Ferdinand with his mouth full, "what other reason?"

"Oh! who knows? Perhaps a very pretty reason—very young and very fair."

"Bah!"

"Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, for instance."

"What, *do you really* think, dear? What an idea! But after all why not? People say she is very good looking."

"People say, indeed? Why, don't you know her yourself?"

"Yes, no doubt, but then for the last two years I have never looked at any other woman but yourself."

"And I hope such will always be the case."

"Oh I can swear that," gravely answered Ferdinand. "But to return to your discovery. It seems incredible that Hector can be in love. Why has he said nothing to me? It would be the height of dissimulation, a perfect crime against friendship! However, I will confess him and find out the truth."

There was to be but little difficulty about the matter, for in point of fact Hector's confession was quite ready. After three weeks of the cruellest and yet most comical perplexity that ever troubled a lover's heart and head, he had at last made up his mind. Ah! he had not done so without a struggle. He loved Lousie d'Ambleçay; he felt it, he knew it. All his thoughts were for her, and he realized that on her depended the happiness of his life. He fell asleep thinking of her. And then all of a sudden in the midst of his dreams a spectre rose before him. It seemed as if he beheld Aurélie Blandureau standing at the foot of his bed, like a statue of remorse, and as if he could hear her reproaching him for his treason, his perjured word! Ah! there was his father's promise, and the letter which he himself had written but two months ago. Had he the right to give his heart to any other woman? What would M. Blandureau say? At this thought Hector bowed his head. But then day by day his love for Louise d'Ambleçay grew more intense, and he realised that it would be impossible for him to forget her. And yet, still and ever he was haunted by the thought of Mademoiselle Blandureau. He could never marry *her*, he felt it; nay, he was determined never to do so. But then, how could he recall his engagement, his pledged word? His father's commercial instincts seemed to rise within him, and he was literally horrified by the thought of being posted as a defaulter on settling day. Still, paradoxical as it may seem, this was the only thing that could save him. He at first began by dismissing such a contingency as unworthy of his honesty; but by-and-bye he had to return to it. He set it aside once more; then he

discussed the question at great length in his own mind, and finally after a terrible effort he decided that he had no other alternative: "My father," he said, "entered into engagements which he had no right to take; and I acted wrongly in ratifying them. But in reality, what have I promised? To love Mademoiselle Blandureau. Now, the charm of love consists in its being involuntary, and I love another girl. If I kept my word I should be a dishonourable man, for I should not merely condemn myself to perpetual misery but Mademoiselle Blandureau as well. So I must withdraw. It is a case of compulsion; and besides, after all, it is scarcely bankruptcy, but rather liquidation; and permission 'to wind up' is fairly my due."

Having come to this determination, Hector asked himself how and when he should ask M. Blandureau to cancel the agreement, and after a couple of days of torturing perplexity he decided to write to Paris when everything was finished—that is, after he had asked for Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay's hand. As soon as this point was settled he banished care, dismissed all thoughts of Mademoiselle Blandureau, and, giving himself up to his love, waited for a favourable occasion to declare himself. He who had once been all audacity had become, however, exceedingly timid, and no doubt he would have waited a considerable time longer if Madame Aubanel had not chosen to precipitate events. For the hundredth or rather the thousandth time he had just clumsily turned the conversation to Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, remarking, "I am afraid my presence here must be distasteful to her, for she was your best friend, madame, and since your marriage she has not once called at La Fresnaie."

"Ah, so you have remarked that," said Madame Aubanel. "Dear me, it must be serious."

Ferdinand began to laugh, while Hector blushed, stammered, grew confused, and finally blurted out, "Doesn't she think of marrying?"

"Oh, how do I know!" answered Madame Aubanel with a smile. "You ought to have asked her?"

"I did think of it," rejoined Hector in all simplicity; "but I didn't dare."

"Well, you ought to have dared."

"What? Really? Do you think? Might I hope? Has she spoken to you?"

"Oh, don't go so fast! I don't think anything, I don't know anything, and no one has told me anything?"

"Ah, how cruel you are, madame," said Hector despondently. "And I was already thinking—"

"Of asking her to marry you? Well, why not? Only I fear you will meet with certain difficulties?"

"It is true I'm not a nobleman."

"Oh, that would not be the difficulty."

"No? Then what would it be? Oh madame, I implore you, tell me."

"It's a secret."

Hector seemed so distressed that Ferdinand, who habitually looked at things from their comical side, could not help bursting out into a loud laugh. "Ah! ah!" said he, holding his sides. "Go on, my dear fellow. It's a secret you know; well, what have you to say to that? Come, oh if you could only see yourself! you don't know how comical you look! I have never seen you so amusing before."

Ferdinand's laughter was now shared by his wife, and Hector rose to his feet infuriated. "Well, yes," said he, "I do love Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay.

But what do you find so comical about it?" And receiving no reply, he continued, "Yes, I love her, and wish to make her my wife. Besides, I am determined to settle the matter at once. I can't endure this suspense. So good-bye, I'm off to see the baroness."

"And what shall you say to her?" asked Ferdinand.

"I shall say, 'Madame, I love your daughter, and I think she is not quite indifferent—'"

"Dear me, how conceited you are!"

"But I only repeat what your wife told me."

"Oh fie, sir, for shame!" interrupted Madame Aubanel.

Hector gave the young wife a furious glance and resumed, "I may perhaps have cruelly misinterpreted certain words you said; and if that is the case, I won't say what I intended. No, I'll say—I'll say—Well, never mind, I don't as yet know what I'll say, but at all events I'll have an explanation. I am determined not to remain in this state of uncertainty. I can't bear uncertainty; it's like the toothache, and when a tooth bothers me and prevents me from sleeping, I don't hesitate, I have it pulled out at once." So saying, he walked out of the room, leaving M. and Madame Aubanel fairly convulsed with laughter.

As soon as the young couple recovered themselves Ferdinand anxiously asked his wife if she thought Hector had any chance of success. "I have good reasons to think that Louise won't say no," replied Madame Aubanel; "but I expect that Madame d'Ambleçay will have serious reasons for refusing his request."

They were still discussing the question when Hector returned. In accordance with orthodox French custom he had clothed himself in black from head to foot, like a notary or a waiter; and he was just forcing his hands into a pair of tight straw-coloured kid gloves. "Well, I'm off for the Château d'Ambleçay," he said in a resolute voice. Both M. and Madame Aubanel tried their best to dissuade him from such a precipitate course, but their efforts were unavailing. "I wish to put an end to my uncertainty," he replied; "I feel brave, the die is cast, and I must go on to the end. I have had the horses put to the carriage, so good-bye, and be sure and wish me 'good luck.'"

As soon as he was gone Madame Aubanel begged her husband to hasten after the impudent fellow, who by this foolish, unprepared venture, might compromise all his best chances. But Ferdinand simply shrugged his shoulders. "Do you really think he will go as far as the château?" he asked. "For my part I'm sure he won't. There's an hour's drive from here, so that he will have plenty of time for reflection, and by-and-bye we shall see him come back without having carried out his programme."

V

IN point of fact, as soon as Hector was alone in the carriage rolling towards the Baroness's château, he did begin to reflect. What madness was he intent upon? Was he not perforce exposing himself to a refusal by thus unceremoniously asking Madame d'Ambleçay for her daughter's hand? Why should he risk his whole future on one card? Might he not rather wait, win the esteem of Louise's mother, and interest his friends on his behalf? This is what he said to himself, and yet he never told the coachman to turn back. It was not that he feared Ferdinand's raillery, but he listened rather

to an inner voice, which, like a kind of presentiment, bade him continue his journey. In the courtyard of the Château d'Ambleçay, a big dog came towards him, smelt him and licked his hand. Hector stroked his back and walked on, interpreting the dog's friendship as a happy omen. As he crossed the garden he thought he perceived a white dress scampering off behind the bushes, and he divined that she who wore it must be Louise. At last he was ushered into the drawing-room and requested to wait, while Madame d'Ambleçay was apprised of his arrival. In the interval he was able to recover a little composure which he greatly needed. It now seemed to him that his venture was madness itself, and he was really thinking of rushing off like a thief, when the baroness entered the room.

She looked somewhat surprised on perceiving Hector, but only for a moment. On second reflection she no doubt thought that he was leaving La Fresnaie and had called to make a farewell visit. With a graceful wave of the hand she motioned him to an arm-chair, and sat down herself on the sofa. Hector was very pale, like a man who has imprudently ventured on a perilous enterprise, and perceives he can no longer retreat. He realised that he must make use of all his skill if he wished to win the victory, and so conquering his anguish after a great effort, and mentally deciding that it was best to go to the point at once, he spoke as follows in a tremulous, but distinct voice:—"Madame, I have not been able to see your daughter, Mademoiselle Louise, without loving her, and if I were fortunate enough to be judged worthy of her by you, my whole life would not suffice to pay my debt of gratitude."

Scarcely had Hector spoken than Madame d'Ambleçay rose abruptly, raising her hand to her forehead. Many incidents which had escaped her, or which had appeared insignificant, now seemingly returned to mind, and plainly enough she was mentally accusing herself of blindness or want of foresight. "How imprudent!" she murmured, "how imprudent."

"Excuse me, madame," continued Hector in a supplicating tone. "Forgive me for taking this step in such a singular unceremonious manner. I have obeyed a feeling I am unable to control. In society, as a rule, a relative presents the request which I have dared to make to you, but unfortunately, I am alone in the world, I have no relatives. You scarcely know me, I am aware of it, but a whole city, whenever it might please you, would rise to bear witness in favour of the honour of my family. For myself, madame, ask me, if it pleases you, for years of trial."

The baroness's frigid look abruptly brought Hector to a stand still; and there came a short pause equally embarrassing to both of them. "Believe me sir," at length said Madame d'Ambleçay, striving to overcome her emotion and surprise. "Believe me, I feel very honoured by your application, and yet I think it would have been better to have warned me of it, for I should then have been able to spare you a direct refusal, and I must tell you that it is really impossible for me to grant your request."

"Oh, madame!" exclaimed Hector.

"Impossible, sir," rejoined the baroness in a firm voice. But, scarcely had she spoken than a stifled sob seemed to come from the adjoining room. "Listen!" added Madame d'Ambleçay, silencing any further appeal on Hector's part by an imperious gesture, and, as she raised her hand, a dull sound, as of a person falling on a carpet, was distinctly heard. She sprang towards one of the doors of the drawing-room, raised the *portière*, and then turning towards Hector, who had followed her, exclaimed, "Please wait for

me." A moment later the door closed behind her, and the young fellow remained alone.

Who had uttered that stifled sob? Who had fallen, and no doubt fainted away? It must have been Louise d'Ambleçay, and if that were the case she must have been listening at the door. Hector asked himself how he ought to interpret this incident. Did it not imply that Louise loved him, but then would her love induce the baroness to alter her decision? Flinging himself into an arm-chair he tried to reflect, but his brain was whirling. The agony of suspense was too great. One word might confirm his despair, and once more restore him to happiness. His anguish was so acute that he neither heard the door open, nor noticed the presence of the old priest, Louise's former tutor, who in the meantime entered the drawing-room. At last the abbé touched him on the arm, and Hector started like a sleeper suddenly awakened from a bad dream. He stared at the priest with such a strange expression that the old ecclesiastic could not help smiling. "Madame d'Ambleçay," said he, "will soon return, and has sent me to keep you company in the meantime."

Hector bowed. "Ah, ah," thought he, "I must try diplomacy to make this worthy abbé tell me everything that is going on." He presumed too much on his own powers, however, for, in spite of all his efforts, the witty priest, albeit a ready talker, really told him nothing at all, so that after more than an hour's conversation, our downcast lover was no more advanced than before. He had become quite disconcerted when the baroness appropriately returned to interrupt their *tête-à-tête*. Almost immediately afterwards the priest discreetly retired.

Madame d'Ambleçay wore a very grieved expression, and plainly enough she had been crying. "Before anything else," said she, "I must beg you to give me your word, sir, that, no matter what happens, you will never say a word concerning what has just occurred."

"Oh, madam, I can readily promise you that."

Hector's tone was so sincere, that the baroness's anxiety visibly diminished. "A little while ago," said she, "I told you that what you asked me was impossible, but I had not then spoken to my daughter." She blushed while uttering these last words, and then with more assurance continued, "I have now come to tell you, with her consent, that I do not *think* it will ever be possible to grant you her hand." Hector easily realised the difference between the two replies, and yet this last answer still so cruelly belied his hopes, that he sank back in despair. "My daughter's marriage," continued the baroness, "was decided on many years ago. When M. d'Ambleçay was on his death-bed, he named the husband he had chosen for his daughter. I swore to carry out his decision, and a promise made by a dying man's bedside is sacred. If my heart were to break, if Louise's heart broke, we should still both of us keep that sacred promise."

"Is there no hope then?" murmured Hector, in a gasping voice.

"You shall judge yourself, sir; listen to me. At the epoch of the great Revolution, my husband's grandfather emigrated with his wife and his five children. All his property was seized by order of the Convention, and he and his family found themselves in great distress. They sought refuge in London, and, lost so to say in the great city, where they knew no one, they almost perished of hunger, cold, and misery. With the view of obtaining food for his children, old M. d'Ambleçay sought employment, and obtained a situation in the warehouse of a rich manufacturer, while his wife, by birth a Cinq-Cygne, went out as a day-servant. However, their efforts were fruit-

less. The wife fell dangerously ill, and an exacting landlord was on the point of turning the whole family out into the streets owing to delay in the payment of a quarter's rent, when a saviour providentially presented himself. A wealthy English baronet offered the Ambleçay family the most generous hospitality, and not for days or months, but for years. The Ambleçays were saved by this generous protector, and at a later epoch, when the storm of the Revolution had passed away, he assisted them in returning to France and regaining possession of a portion of their former property. Our family has never forgotten this munificence, sir."

"I can understand it," ejaculated Hector, in a feeble voice.

"Well, sir, to-day we can acquit ourselves of our debt. This generous Englishman's family has known misfortune in its turn. His son was virtually ruined. On several occasions my husband offered to place at his disposal everything we possessed, but he would never accept the slightest help. He died, leaving in his turn a son naturally as poor as himself. It is this young fellow who is to be Louise's husband." On hearing this, Hector could not restrain a gesture of anguish, but the baroness firmly continued, "This marriage was decided between my husband and the young man's father. It was the only way in which we could come to the assistance of this afflicted family, which was too proud to accept the restitution of sums dispensed in charity. For the Ambleçays, be it remembered, lived for years on their charity. The young baronet is acquainted with our intentions; he knows that my daughter has been chosen to be his wife; the epoch fixed for their marriage is approaching, and to tell you everything . . ." Hector's livid pallor positively frightened the baroness, and she hesitated for a moment as if courage failed her to finish her phrase. But at last, averting her head, she concluded, "To tell you everything, we are even now expecting his arrival!"

"Ah, madam," exclaimed Hector, "you are very cruel. Why did you attenuate your first refusal?"

"I recalled my first words," replied the baroness, "because, although I was altogether against you, before speaking to Louise, my words with her modified my ideas. Originally I should have done everything to hasten her marriage with the young baronet, but now I can at least promise not to press matters."

"Then what do you hope for?"

"I hope in God. Perhaps the young Englishman may forget the engagement. Perhaps Louise will not please him."

Hector sadly shook his head. "Ah, if one could only help him to forget it," said he. "If I knew him I might go and tell him—"

"Tell him nothing, sir. Indeed if you so much as mentioned my daughter's name in his presence you would have even fewer chances in your favour than to-day."

"But I am rich, and if half my fortune—"

"Oh, if it were simply a question of money it would be already settled," curtly rejoined the baroness.

"Ah! How imprudent it is for parents to decide their children's future beforehand," murmured Hector. "My own father had decided that I should marry the daughter of one of his friends, and that friend is precisely expecting me just now."

"And you didn't mention it?" remarked Madame d'Ambleçay reproachfully. "Why, that's another obstacle in the way."

"Oh, if that were the only one!" said Hector carelessly; whereupon the

baroness rejoined, "I will excuse you sir, for I make allowances for your state of mind, but as matters stand, even if the young English baronet did refuse to marry Louise, I would never grant you her hand so long as the young lady you yourself are engaged to may remain unmarried. But allow me to retire. Trust in Providence. For myself I have but one request to make you—"

"I can divine it, madame. You may rely on me. This evening I shall have left La Fresnaie." Then, taking leave of the baroness, Hector withdrew in despair.

As he was crossing the courtyard towards the carriage waiting for him, he was to his great surprise suddenly accosted by the worthy old priest who held a letter in his hand. "Pray, excuse me," said the *abbé*. "But if I recollect rightly you told me, in the course of our conversation just now, that you were soon going to start for Paris."

"I shall be there to-morrow," rejoined Hector with a sigh.

"Indeed! Well, I should be greatly obliged if you would kindly render me a little service. Could you conveniently hand this letter to Sir James Wellesley, the young Englishman to whom Mademoiselle Louise is engaged? He is stopping at the *Hôtel des Etrangers* in the *Rue de Rivoli*."

Hector trembled with delight, and eagerly put the proffered missive into his pocket, whilst the old priest, repeating his thanks, escorted him to the vehicle. "What can this mean?" thought our hero as he was rolling along towards La Fresnaie, "Madame d'Ambleçay had not told me this confounded Englishman's name. Can she have devised this means of bringing me into contact with him? It's scarcely probable. Can Louise have had the idea? No, that's impossible. So it must be that cunning old *abbé*. Well I owe him my thanks. For now that I know who this baronet is, and where to find him, I shall no doubt hit upon some means of thwarting his design."

When Hector reached La Fresnaie he had to give the Aubanels an elaborate account of his mission. In accordance with his promise to Madame d'Ambleçay he did not mention the incident which had interrupted their conversation, but otherwise he made a clear breast of everything. On his mentioning the letter which the priest had handed to him, Madame Aubanel willingly opined that he undoubtedly had the means of salvation in his possession; but at the same time she implored him to be very circumspect.

That same evening Ferdinand escorted his friend to the nearest railway station, some three leagues distant, and on the road Hector unfolded a singular plan he had formed in hopes of preventing the young baronet from marrying Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay. He intended to make friends with him, he said, place himself at his disposal, take him about Paris, open his eyes to the seductions of the capital, and so thoroughly corrupt and deprave him that he would speedily forget all about his matrimonial engagements. "And moreover," continued Hector, carried away by his fantastic idea, "this baronet is poor already, and after a little life on the Boulevards he won't have a single sou left. But I shall be there, and I'll lend him plenty of money, and pretend to content myself with his acceptances. But one fine morning, when he is head over heels in my debt, I shall simply go to a *huissier*, and have him locked up in the debtor's prison. We shall then see if he won't come to terms."

"Upon my word," exclaimed Ferdinand, "you are an ingenious scoundrel, and no mistake!"

"Oh! I won't be too hard upon him," retorted Hector. "As soon as I am married to Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, I'll grant him a pension of twenty

thousand francs a year ; and he can do whatever he may like with it ; but, confound the man, I won't allow him to marry Louise."

By this time the two friends had reached the railway station. Hector took his ticket and had his luggage registered ; and he was about to bid Ferdinand good-bye, when the latter abruptly drew him into a corner. "Look here," said he mysteriously, "last summer a photographer came to La Fresnaie—"

"Good heavens !" ejaculated Hector, "what do you mean ?"

"Wait a bit. He wasn't very skilful, but, still, I allowed him to take my intended's portrait. Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay was there at the time, and she profited of the opportunity to have her's taken as well. She gave my wife a copy, and this afternoon I stole it out of the album for your benefit. Here it is."

"Oh, Ferdinand !" exclaimed Hector. "What a friend you are ! Quick give it to me."

"Here, put it in your pocket and make haste, for the train's coming in and only waits two minutes. Now, good-bye ; send us your address. We'll write you word if anything fresh happens." With these words they parted, and Hector sprang into the train, simultaneously blessing the old priest, Ferdinand, and the unknown photographer. He was sorry not to be able to find an empty compartment, but he profited of the drowsiness of his fellow travellers to draw Louise's portrait very frequently from his pocket, and tell it all manner of sweet mysterious things.

VI.

WORTHY M. Blandureau was expecting his future son-in-law. Hector had given three months' warning, which had been employed in making preparations for his reception. M. Blandureau had clothed his servants in brand new liveries from head to foot, and changed all the drawing-room furniture from floor to ceiling. When everything was ready he grew extremely impatient, and anxiously counted up the days that must yet elapse before his daughter's future husband arrived. Madame Blandureau, on her side, was also no little disturbed, giving herself up to a curious sensation of mingled nervousness and curiosity. The only person in the house who seemed quite indifferent to the coming visit was Mademoiselle Aurélie, who displayed all the calmness that befits a former pupil of the aristocratic Convent of the Sacred Heart, where young ladies are galvanized as it were into a state of proper frigidity.

Every one knows the Blandureau family. Paterfamilias is a stout little man, with short legs and short arms. His features are not deficient in intelligence, and his sly, bright eyes, alone suffice to explain how it happens that he has managed to retire from business with an enormous fortune. If he could only forget that fortune of his, he would be the best fellow in the world. At times he does just manage to forget it for a few moments, and then he's all affability, listening to you with a pleasant smile and answering in a simple kindly manner. But then all of a sudden his millions return to his mind, and his politeness vanishes at the same moment. He becomes disagreeable and arrogant ; he speaks in a pompous voice, refuses to be contradicted, and generally assumes the obnoxious air of a conceited *parvenu*. M. Blandureau greatly suffers from spleen. He wished to realise a great fortune, and he has effected his purpose ; but now, with no

further object in life, he is at a loss what to do with himself. He inwardly curses the vain impulse that led him to retire from business, and on commercial settling days he becomes especially nervous, bitterly bewailing that he has nothing either to receive or pay away. Time hangs so heavily on his hands that he is often fain to pick a quarrel with his wife, the more so as he is afraid of his daughter, imperious Mademoiselle Aurélie, who absolutely overwhelms him with her superiority, so that he, poor man, although ashamed of his weakness, is reduced to exercise his authority over his better half. Madame Blandureau is as it were a target for both her husband and her daughter. She dreads and venerates the former—the skilful man who has made his fortune—and she admires and fears Aurélie for her sarcastic wit and haughty mien. Paradoxical as it may seem, the poor woman is delighted to be rich, and yet her fortune seriously interferes with her happiness. She has three dozen dresses in her wardrobe, but she is ill at ease in all of them. She would greatly prefer to dress in simple style, whereas her husband insists upon her wearing the most gorgeous toilettes. She would very much like to go out walking, but M. Blandureau invariably compels her to drive out in the carriage, with the footman and coachman arrayed in gaudy liveries. Finally, she is so intimidated by the impudent air and the superb garments of her own servants, that she scarcely dares to give them an order.

Mademoiselle Aurélie is very different. She is the true mistress of the house. Her will is law. And this be it noted is but one instance out of many, for vain folks of the middle classes are habitually their children's slaves. You may divine Mademoiselle Blandureau's character on looking at her. Haughty and capricious, she is only sensible to the idiotic satisfactions of vanity. She is not merely dignified, but positively stern. Her black eyes are as cold and as piercing as steel, and the only tears she has ever shed have been tears of anger. As for her curt, harsh voice, it is yet more imperious than her glance. Perhaps she loves her parents, and at all events, although she treats her mother like a servant-maid, she is glad that her father has amassed a large fortune. The only thing she cannot forgive him is his name—that hateful, common, ridiculous name of Blandureau! That name, indeed, has poisoned her life. Many and many a time did she regret it during her sojourn at the aristocratic Convent of the Sacred Heart, for her companions, almost all of them daughters of the old nobility, were for ever turning it to ridicule. A girl with such a name as Blandureau, they said, could only have one hope in life—that of being chosen by some ruined nobleman to assist him in regilding his escutcheon. Aurélie was exasperated by her school-fellows' raillery, and by way of retaliation she made a most absurd display of toilettes and jewellery, whercupon she was overwhelmed with epigrams and mock compliments. To complete her mortification she was nicknamed "*Blandurette*," and one Saturday afternoon, when, in accordance with her orders, her father sent a regular gala carriage to convey her home, her enemies composed a derisive ditty to the popular tune of "*Cadet Roussel*." This song proved too much for Mademoiselle Aurélie's nerves, and the first time she heard it sung, she almost went into hysterics. As a matter of course, she immediately wrote and complained to her father, and requested, or rather ordered him to remove her from the convent. Her injunction was naturally obeyed, and to complete her education, she had masters at home. If Mademoiselle Aurélie ever thought of marriage, it was surely with the view of ridding herself of her hateful surname. It is true that Hector was not a nobleman, but his

patronymic had a sonorous ring; and, besides, she intended to persuade him to assume the aristocratic prefix "de," and perhaps even to purchase a title, which some folks declare to be easy enough, providing one has plenty of money to spare.

Although Hector's appointment with the Blandureau family was fixed for the dreary autumnal season, Aurélie and her parents were still sojourning at their country house at Ville d'Avray. This country house, by the way, was the work of M. Blandureau's spare time. He called it his *bon-bonnière*, and had spent three years and half a million of francs in the task of erecting it. It was not unlike certain wedding-cakes, presenting a strange intermingling of every variety of adornment. It boasted towers and battlements with an Italian peristyle and ogival windows. One corner was a kind of bastard Gothic, and a few paces off sundry Doric columns unexpectedly presented themselves to view; while to complete the medley a couple of conical capped turrets flanked a long verandah, such as be-gird the houses of planters in the Southern States. Round about Paris residences of this description are to be met with on all sides, and the capital counts numerous architects who have made their fortunes by covering its environs with similar fantastic horrors. To flatter the ex-commission merchant, the neighbours called his country seat, "Blandureau's Folly," and it was not undeserving of the name. Stone and brick work were mingled in its construction, and it was, moreover, adorned outside with hideous fresco paintings, coloured tiles, and marble incrustations. At a little distance off it might indeed have been taken for a Chinese pagoda, and one was surprised not to see a few citizens of the Celestial empire loitering in its neighbourhood. A park of some little extent surrounded it, and M. Blandureau had originally wished to root up the old trees, and plant a variety of exotic shrubs, but as this idea was opposed by Mademoiselle Aurélie, he had to fall back on what was more especially called the garden, which he endeavoured to transform into a miniature Bois de Boulogne, with a quantity of artificial rock-work, a grotto, two bridges, a pond, a river, and a cascade. An old horse was employed to draw the water for the river from a well, and as a natural consequence, whenever the quadruped rested or took his meals, the cascade invariably ceased to trickle, and the stream ran dry.

When Hector presented himself at Ville d'Avray on the morrow of his departure from La Fresnaie, M. Blandureau only waited to learn his name, before declaring that he would have recognised him among a thousand. In point of fact this was hard to believe, for he had not once seen his future son-in-law since the latter was ten years old. However, he pressed him to his heart, called him his boy, and excitedly summoned the whole household to the spot. Madame Blandureau speedily arrived, but Mademoiselle Aurélie could not at first be found. Eventually it transpired that, on hearing of her intended's arrival, she had retired to her room with the view of making a hasty toilet; and as to her mind the occasion merely warranted a slight change of attire, she was able to put in an appearance not quite two hours' later. She approached with a majestic air, and amid a prolonged rustle of silk, her train effectively sweeping the carpet as she walked along. She fairly looked like a statue of dignity just descended from its pedestal. "Ah! here you are!" joyfully exclaimed M. Blandureau as soon as he perceived her, and taking hold of her hand and placing it in Hector's, he paternally added:—"Come, kiss each other my children."

But the children did not embrace—to tell the truth, Mademoiselle

Aurélië retreated a few steps back and made a most elaborate curtsy, while Hector fairly bowed to the ground. The young lady had just decided in her own mind that her intended husband did not at all suit her, and that she would have nothing to do with him, while Hector, despite his gallant smile, inwardly mused, "Dear me I can't say I like this big arrogant-looking girl. Even if I had not previously decided to break off the match I should certainly do so now." He had come direct to Ville d'Avray, realising that he must in common politeness keep his appointment with M. Blandureau, but on the other hand anxious to find some means of compelling his chosen father-in-law to initiate a rupture. Unfortunately he looked straight forward and simple-minded, and M. Blandureau delighted in people of that character. But, then there was some compensation in the fact that Mademoiselle Aurélië's tastes were very different, and Hector congratulated himself on the circumstance. "If I cannot manage to displease the father," he thought, "I shall certainly be able to sicken the daughter, and that will amount to the same thing." Hector's manners, be it noted, were simple and unaffected, as is the case with all men of good breeding, but Mademoiselle Blandureau confounded simplicity with vulgarity. She considered that fashionable etiquette required a man to speak and act in an emphatic manner, and invariably preserve a solemn face. Having divined her character, after spending an hour or so in her company, Hector set to work to carry out his plan. At the dinner-table he was as jovial and as garrulous as a commercial traveller. He pretended not to notice how often Mademoiselle Aurélië bit her lips with vexation, but rattled on, talking of commercial affairs and speculations with a wonderful assumption of knowledge, although in point of fact he scarcely had a bare acquaintance with business matters. Still he spoke fluently if not quite correctly on such subjects as falls and rises in market prices, ships and cargoes, freights and port dues, ballast and warehousing, buying and selling, and many other things besides. He had, he suddenly declared, a most brilliant idea which he intended to put into execution as soon as he was married. He meant to buy up all the raw hides on the Mexican markets, create a strong demand for them, lay down the law to the French tanners, keep up the prices in France, and thus realise very large profits indeed. This speech made Mademoiselle Aurélië turn paler than ever, but there was worse in store for her, for at dessert Hector assumed a sentimental tone, spoke of the future, and revealed what he called "the dream of his life." He hoped, he said, to find peace and happiness in matrimony. His wife would be his cashier, keep the books, and attend to the correspondence. "Just think, mademoiselle," he added; "we shall have opportunities to undertake some splendid speculations, and we are bound to make large profits, for we shall have hardly any office expenses at all." Aurélië made no reply, but in her mind she vowed to thwart all these elaborate plans.

Hector carried his game so far that at last he almost began to bore even worthy M. Blandureau. Still, as it was getting late, the latter could not in common decency avoid offering his future son-in-law a room for the night, but he did not insist on the point, for his daughter was looking daggers at him. Moreover, Hector declared that he had an appointment in Paris early the next morning, and could not conveniently remain at Ville d'Avray. So he took his leave, and was escorted by M. Blandureau as far as the garden gate. "Well," said he, "when shall we fix the marriage?"

"Oh, there's no hurry," replied the retired commission merchant. "We'll talk it over another day."

An enamoured suitor would naturally have been dismayed by such an inauspicious reply, but Hector was positively delighted. "Ah ! ah !" thought he, "I've settled my business here, and now I must tackle the Englishman."

VII.

AT nine o'clock on the following morning he presented himself at the *Hôtel des Etrangers* in the *Rue de Rivoli*, and asked to see Sir James Wellesley, whereupon a servant escorted him to the fourth floor and ushered him into a little sitting-room. A large plan of Paris lay open on the table, and a variety of guide books bestrewed the mantelpiece. There was the inevitable "Murray" flanked by the scarcely less inevitable "Bædecker," and beside them lay "The Traveller's Illustrated Guide to Paris," "How to visit Paris in Three Days," "The Guide to the Paris Museums," and the "Vade Mecum of the Parisian Promenades." Two or three pocket dictionaries and various conversational manuals completed the motley pile of books. Hector had just had time to glance at them and look round the apartment when an inner door opened and Sir James Wellesley appeared.

The young baronet was an Englishman from head to foot. He looked some thirty years of age. His hair was not particularly fair, but his beard was of the approved fiery tinge. He had a clear ruddy complexion, and a pair of expressionless pale blue eyes. He was tall, and his gait was as stiff as could be desired. Altogether, his nationality was stamped upon him, and he would have been recognised as a son of perfidious Albion in any attire or under any circumstances. Sir James scarcely spoke any French at all, and he was turning his tongue in his mouth, trying to find some word or other, when Hector opportunely raised his voice, "Have I the honour of speaking to Sir James Wellesley?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the baronet in a curt tone.

"Then, allow me to hand you this letter," resumed Hector, drawing from his pocket the missive which the old priest had entrusted to his care.

Sir James took the letter, and, begging Hector to excuse him, tore the envelope open. He read the abbé's communication at a glance, for the priest had taken the precaution of writing to him in English. The letter no doubt spoke very favourably of Hector, for the baronet's manner quite changed as soon as he had mastered its contents. Divesting himself of his previous frigidity he became polite and even cordial, inviting his visitor to sit down, a thing he never did with people who were not properly introduced to him. After an hour's laborious conversation—laborious on account of Sir James's ignorance of French and Hector's ignorance of English, the two young men were on the best of terms together. Sir James informed his new friend that he was engaged to be married, and intended starting shortly for Touraine, where his bride's family expected him. If he remained momentarily in Paris, it was with the view of perfecting himself in the French language so as to be able to speak intelligibly to his betrothed ; whereupon Hector surmised that such a result would take no little time to attain. Sir James next mentioned how lonely he found himself in Paris where he really knew no one at all. The people he spoke to seemed to look at him in a mocking manner. The shopkeepers robbed him. At the theatre he virtually understood nothing, and altogether, as he said with a sigh, he was "very disappointed indeed."

But his face brightened when Hector answered that he intended remain-

ing some weeks in Paris, and would place himself at his disposal, either to accompany him in sight-seeing or to introduce him to families with which he was acquainted. Sir James was, indeed, so touched that he swore eternal friendship on the spot, while Hector mentally remarked, "Ay, we *will* be friends and no mistake. As you are so candid, my fine fellow, my task will be all the easier, and you may be sure I won't lose sight of you till I have destroyed all chances of your ever marrying Mademoiselle d'Amblecay." Then to cement this *impromptu* friendship without loss of time, he offered to introduce Sir James that very evening to worthy M. Blandureau, taking good care, however, not to mention that the Blandureau in question was, after all, only a retired trader. For he had heard that Tory baronets were very susceptible, and feared that Sir James might decline to mix with a man who had made his fortune in his counting house.

VIII.

It is said that a commercial life is not precisely fitted to develop the qualities of the heart and mind, and yet M. Blandureau can boast a rare and precious virtue, which is the key stone of his character, and invests him with a certain superiority over many of his fellow-men. This vain old parvenu is a fanatic believer in what he calls the holiness of commercial probity. This belief dates from the time when he first started in business, and when he signed a great many promissory notes, and always faithfully paid them on settling days. He might easily have contented himself with that, but M. Blandureau was determined not to be an ordinary trader. When in course of time his signature became as good as a bank-note, he decided to give his word the same value as his signature; and thereafter compelled himself to keep his verbal promises quite as strictly as he fulfilled his written engagements. He declared that a man who did not consider himself bound to follow such or such a course simply because "there was nothing written down" was after all only a vulgar scoundrel. Whoever did business with M. Blandureau might sleep at ease when he had said "That's agreed." Those words from his lips were indeed equivalent to a contract drawn up by two notaries. Of course this practice had more than once resulted to this personal disadvantage. At times, after making a verbal bargain, he had perceived that he would be a loser, but far from recalling his word, he had repeated it, preferring to make a sacrifice rather than have his promise questioned. If this conduct had altogether impoverished him, he would no doubt have been derided, but on the contrary, despite a few blunders, he steadily grew richer and richer, and so he was admired. In Paris and in London, at Brussels, and at New York, merchants were in the habit of saying: "Blandureau's word is worth its weight in gold;" and as a matter of course he felt very proud of the circumstance. Having retired from business, he still applied these principles to his private life, and they became as it were his invariable rule and guide even in the most ordinary circumstances, so that, to say the truth, his "commercial probity" degenerated into monomania. Any one who missed an appointment with him fell greatly in his esteem; but on the other hand there was no fear of *him* breaking his word. If you invited him to dinner, and he accepted, his presence became a foregone conclusion. It might have rained, hailed, snowed, or thundered, and yet he would have come. He would have come indeed had he been ill, had he even been dying. And he would have done

due honour to the repast, have eaten, drank, and proved a capital "knife and fork," even at the risk of dying of indigestion the same night.

With such a character it was evident that M. Blandureau could not even think of breaking off the match, which he and Hector's father had decided on. By his conversation during dinner and afterwards, Hector, it is true, had not quite pleased him, but he might have displeased him altogether, and yet M. Blandureau would never have had the idea of modifying what he considered a sacred agreement. Thus Hector made a great mistake when he imagined that affairs were progressing favourably in this direction. It was simply because M. Blandureau had not had leisure for reflection that he had answered the query, "When shall we fix the marriage," in such an evasive manner. Hector's conversation had caused him great deception, and he had not been able to master his disappointment and bad humour. He had obeyed that "first impulse," which we all have, and which we all ought to guard against. But scarcely had Hector left, than he began to regret his answer, which he feared might awaken certain doubts in the young man's mind, and lead him to imagine that he (Blandureau) wished to temporise, and in the meanwhile find some pretext to get rid of him politely. If it had not been so late M. Blandureau would certainly have hastened after his chosen son-in-law, but he did not even know Hector's address in Paris, so he returned indoors, mentally resolving to make a full apology on the following day. "This marriage doesn't quite please me," he said to himself, "but I must hasten to have it carried out; for I have given my word and must keep it." He almost said as much to his daughter when she candidly told him that she should never love the husband he had chosen for her. "I can't help it, my poor child," he answered; "we have engaged in an unfortunate speculation, but we must submit to the consequences. In keeping one's promises, the great merit is, to do so, when the result may prove disadvantageous, and so we'll keep ours. Blandureau's word you know is worth its weight in gold." And as Mademoiselle Aurélie pouted significantly, he added: "Don't distress yourself, my dear. After all I've only promised M. Malestrat your hand. So you must marry him. But fortunately I have not promised that you would love him, so if your opinion doesn't change after the marriage, why we can apply for a legal separation, or you can part amicably if he will agree to it."

This way of looking at matrimony made Mademoiselle Aurélie smile, and she did not insist. She knew that nothing she could tell her father would be of any use, and so she resigned herself to the idea of marrying Hector. Besides her grief at having to do so was not so particularly acute, for no one else had as yet touched her heart. However, she revolved in her mind a pretty little plan by which she hoped to gain conjugal supremacy on the very morrow of her marriage. On this occasion Madame Blandureau's opinion was not asked for, and for a very simple reason—the worthy lady habitually never has any opinion of her own. And yet strange as it may seem, she had formed something very like one in reference to Hector. "Dear young man," she thought, "thank Heaven you won't have time to study my daughter's character. You'll marry her within a fortnight and thus assure my peace in my old age. I could bless you a thousand times over."

Such was the moral situation of the Blandureau family, when Hector returned to Ville d'Avray—this time accompanied by his new friend, Sir James Wellesley. This was the young baronet's *début* in Parisian society, which enjoys throughout Europe the reputation of being the wittiest, most

agreeable, and yet most exacting in the world. In truth, however, one can hardly say that it fully tallies with this description. Sir James had passed a part of the day in preparing for the ordeal, and had assumed his stiffest and most disdainful air—that air of consummate conceit which particularly belongs to the citizens of Great Britain. Although he was not without certain inward misgivings at having to appear before a tribunal of French ladies, he outwardly evinced the assurance and self-confidence of a man who knew his own value, and was fully aware that if but a hair of his head were touched, Lord Palmerston (then alive) would not have hesitated to equip a hundred vessels and spend many millions of money to obtain fit and proper reparation. When Hector had offered to introduce the young Englishman to the Blandureau family, his object had been to cement their friendship at once, so as to allow Sir James no opportunity of escaping him. He had certainly never imagined that the baronet was likely to achieve any social success. And yet such proved to be the case, for Sir James Wellesley appeared to the Blandureau family like the living incarnation of noble traditions, and Madame Blandureau subsequently confessed that when he entered her drawing-room for the first time, she had felt as impressed as if she had beheld an emperor. So Hector found himself relegated to the background; in fact he was fairly eclipsed. Never had M. Blandureau done the honours of his house with such graciousness and affability. He was all attention and respect for his new guest, and when he learnt that Sir James would inherit a peerage from one of his uncles who sat in the House of Lords, he became perfectly obsequious. Henceforth he persisted, despite all expostulations, in calling the baronet “my lord;” and in his delight at having an authentic representative of the English aristocracy at his table, he only remembered Hector to congratulate him on his connections, and to thank him for having brought this distinguished foreigner to Ville d’Avray.

Mademoiselle Aurélie was if possible yet more delighted than her father, and she was quite as unable to conceal her impression. Sir James’s meaningless glance made her blush like a school-girl, and for the first time in her life she felt embarrassed, and doubted her own powers. Strange to relate she really felt something like a slight beating of the heart. But then could one dream of a more grandly haughty, or of a more perfectly frigid aristocrat than Sir James? Was he not the *beau idéal* of etiquette and social solemnity? All young girls, whether they own it or not, picture to themselves in the recesses of their hearts some improbable hero whom they are destined never to meet; but more fortunate than her fellows, Mademoiselle Blandureau had found *her* hero; and the consequences were surprising indeed. Her haughty glance waxed almost tender, her voice lost its imperious tone, her attitude and manners became unusually modest. She forgot to play the part of a queen, and contented herself with acting like a young girl. Madame Blandureau was so surprised that she doubted her senses, but the truth is that Aurélie had met her fate.

Sir James, on his side, soon realised that he had conquered the household. He felt more at ease, forgot his assumed stiffness and frigidity, and ceased to allow suspicious prudence to keep him eternally on the *qui vive*. He had come to a stranger’s house, and now after an hour’s stay, he felt as if he were among friends. On starting from Paris with Hector, he had sworn not to open his mouth, save to partake of refreshments or to articulate such monosyllables as are after all absolutely requisite. He was indeed especially anxious to avoid being laughed at, on account of his bad French.

But now he saw that no one thought of making fun of him, and so he ventured to speak—and, indeed, he spoke a great deal. It is true that he was scarcely understood, but then he was listened to with all the greater attention.

That evening finally destroyed Hector's prestige in Mademoiselle Aurélie's mind. Whilst pretending to listen to a long speech which Sir James delivered in trying to explain to M. Blandureau the difference between Whig and Tory—which difference the ex-commission merchant never succeeded in understanding—she mentally compared the two young men with each other—and the comparison did not at all result in Hector's favour. How trivial and common he seemed to her! He was gay, witty, and caustic; when he spoke he gesticulated like all men from the south; he laughed, and worst of all, the others laughed while listening to him. What a difference there was between these two young fellows. The Englishman so reserved, and the Frenchman so expansive. Ah! at first sight one could easily tell that the former was a peer's nephew, and the latter but a Bordeaux merchant! For, after all, M. Malestrat was but a trader, or at least his father had been one. Mademoiselle Aurélie felt very sad while she allowed her thoughts to follow this course. "Ah!" she murmured, "must I really marry the man I hate?" Such a prospect almost made her weep, and for the first time in her life she mentally reproached her father for having chosen her a husband without consulting her. She had never felt so truly unhappy before.

Sir James did not seem to notice the flight of time, and it was only when the clock struck midnight that he at length spoke of retiring. Whilst conducting his guests to the gate, M. Blandureau made "Lord" Wellesley promise that he would speedily return to Ville d'Avray, begging him indeed to come as often as possible. Sir James readily gave his word, and then, when he and Hector was again alone together, he exclaimed: "I can't find words to tell you what an impression that young lady has made on me. I really find her most charming and loveable."

Hector was opening his mouth to reply: "She is to be my wife," when a strange improbable presentiment appropriately prompted him to hold his tongue.

IX.

HECTOR had given no thought to the qualms of conscience on the day when he conceived the abominable plan which was to enable him to get rid of the happy mortal selected to marry Louise d'Ambleçay. He had only listened to his despair, the adviser of mad resolutions. But with calm and reflection the sentiment of honour returned, and he realised how odious was the project he had formed. Quite horrified, he gave up all idea of prosecuting it, and yet he saw no other means of salvation. What could he do? Wait. That was all; and so he waited like a condemned man whose sentence is shortly to be carried into effect. If he still returned to Ville d'Avray it was because he did not wish to initiate the rupture. He felt convinced that he would soon be favoured with a polite dismissal; and certainly he did not at all evince the solicitude of a suitor admitted to pay his court, for at the most he visited the Blandureaus once or twice a week.

After all, he was not wanted at Ville d'Avray. The retired merchant's country seat claimed another visitor—a most assiduous one, who fulfilled with marvellous exactitude all Hector's neglected duties. Like M.

Blandureau, Sir James was a man who knew how to keep his word. He had promised to pay frequent visits to Ville d'Avray, and, in fact, he went there every day. Yes, every day, did this exemplary audacious baronet willingly undergo the ordeal of three and four hours' conversation with the retired commission merchant, who was delighted to find such an attentive listener in the nephew of an English peer. It is true that Sir James usually replied in such a manner as to prove that he had not at all heard or understood what was said to him, but this was of no consequence to M. Blandureau, who attributing the incoherent character of the baronet's answers to his scanty knowledge of French, rattled on again as fast as ever.

The truth is, that while to all appearance patiently listening to M. Blandureau, Sir James was really all eyes and attention for Mademoiselle Aurélie. He had fallen in love with her at first sight, and now he was absolutely entranced, enraptured. Unfortunately, he could not altogether rid himself of his memory, and whenever he recollected his engagement with Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay he suffered much as Hector had suffered on thinking of Mademoiselle Blandureau. Then it was that conscience recalled him to a sense of honour and duty. But what is duty compared with love? And Sir James already realised that he must die if he failed to win Aurélie's heart and hand. Unfortunately he was poor, and he knew that the Blandureau family was immensely wealthy. This seemed to him an insurmountable obstacle, for although, despite his impoverished circumstances, he really had the greatest contempt for money, would other people believe in his disinterestedness? If he asked M. Blandureau for Mademoiselle Aurélie's hand would not the step be looked upon as an attempt to obtain money to regild his escutcheon and restore the family mansion? Fortunately, this distressing idea vanished at the first glance from the young lady herself, and her eyes, it may be mentioned, very often met the baronet's. Despite Sir James's natural timidity and modesty (none the less real, although concealed by an apparent air of haughtiness), he could not help noticing in the long run that Mademoiselle Blandureau by no means avoided him. As soon as he reached Ville d'Avray, she hastened into the drawing-room, if, indeed, she were not already there, waiting for him; and in addition, more than once, after taking his leave, he had noticed a muslin curtain drawn back as if a pair of adorable dark eyes were anxious to follow him on his way back to Paris. At first he doubted the truth, ascribing what he noticed to his own imagination, or else setting it down to chance; but at last, one fine day, it so happened that he remained for five minutes alone with the fascinating Aurélie. Perhaps, that was chance as well, but it may have been in some degree prepared on the young lady's side. Five minutes are no doubt but a very brief space of time, and yet it is astonishing how many things may be said while they elapse, especially when people don't waste their time in word of mouth, and Sir James and Aurélie, be it noted, only resorted to the language of their eyes. To tell the truth, the magnetic power of love quite revolutionised the young baronet's innate ideas of propriety, and he was guilty of an act of audacity which he cannot explain to himself even to-day. He dared to take hold of Mademoiselle Aurélie's hand and raise it to his lips.

Mademoiselle Aurélie by no means withdrew her hand, in fact, it seemed as if a slight pressure of her fingers mutely answered Sir James's mute declaration. No doubt he would have stammered out some burning phrase, when inappropriately enough M. Blandureau burst into the room like a whirlwind. The retired merchant did not notice either his daughter's

blushes or the baronet's confusion. He held a newspaper in his hand and wished his "Lordship" to give him some explanations concerning the conduct of the English Government in the affair of the *San Jacinto*. After a stupendous effort, Sir James succeeded in mastering his emotion. He would have given anything to get rid of M. Blandureau. He knew now that he was really loved, and he wished to enjoy his felicity ; but no, he must find some answer for this pestering old father, who obstinately kept on repeating, "What do you think of the arrest of the Southern Commissioners?"

At that moment the unfortunate baronet was far from thinking anything at all about the various incidents of the War of Secession, then waging in the United States. His only thought was that Mademoiselle Blandureau was the most beautiful woman in the world. However, he must give her father some answer or other, and so he embarked on generalities, and spent a full quarter of an hour in amplifying this well known principle of British policy. "Public and political morality are worthy of all respect, but cotton is indispensable to ensure the livelihood of our Liverpool brokers, and of our Manchester manufacturers."

That day which had begun so happily for Sir James was, alas, destined to terminate most mournfully. In the morning Aurélie had tacitly confessed her love for him, and in the evening he learnt from M. Blandureau's own lips that she was already engaged, and would be Hector's wife before a month was over. The retired merchant mentioned the fact in a casual way, and, noticing the baronet's surprise, not to say dismay, expressed his wonder that M. Malestrat had not acquainted "His Lordship" with the circumstance before.

"Is it possible?" groaned Sir James. "Is it possible?"

"Dear me!" exclaimed M. Blandureau, at a loss to explain his guest's sudden pallor and emotion. "What is the matter, my lord?"

"Oh I suffer," the baronet replied; "I suffer dreadfully." And rising from his seat he withdrew without noticing that Mademoiselle Aurélie plainly shared his emotion.

He returned home in a dreadful state of mind. All his usual frigidity was gone, and he tramped up and down his room, gesticulating furiously and talking to himself aloud, "I am decidedly cursed," he groaned. "I have broken my word as a gentleman. I have forgotten Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, and my promise to marry her; and I have stolen the heart of the girl who was to marry the only friend I have in France. I shall appear a traitor in his eyes; and, yes, I am a vile contemptible being." At first he thought of writing to Hector and confessing his involuntary crime, but on reflection another idea occurred to him. What it was he did not audibly explain, but he repeatedly murmured, "Yes, that is my only course, my only chance left." And on the morrow he returned to Ville d'Avray, as if nothing whatever had occurred. Thenceforward, however, he led a frightful existence. In the society of Mademoiselle Aurélie he was transported to the seventh heaven; but as soon as he found himself alone again, he was plunged, as it were, down into the bottomless pit.

X.

BEFORE long M. Blandureau began to notice that something was going on. He had no precise fact to guide him, but to use a favourite legal term there were "serious presumptions" in favour of his opinion. He was about as

displeased as he could be ; for hitherto he had ascribed Sir James's daily visits to the charms of his own delightful conversation, and the thought that the baronet might also come for his daughter seriously wounded his self-esteem. Of course he would have been delighted to be able to marry Aurélie to the nephew of an English peer, but then there was his sacred engagement with Hector, and so he thought it best to hasten the projected wedding and acquaint his chosen son-in-law with his suspicions.

Hector, however, had already serious suspicions of his own. One day while he was at Ville d'Avray, where he came less frequently than ever, he espied an English grammar and a pocket dictionary lying on a table. Their presence there had a very significant meaning, and on examining them he ascertained that the leaves were cut and that they had evidently been used, for a number of pencil marks figured on the margins of the pages. "Oh ! oh !" thought Hector, "Mademoiselle Aurélie is far too sensible to try and learn English without a master, so I suppose that my friend, James, is acting in that capacity. Well I can only hope that she will soon be able to talk as fluently as a Lancashire lass !" And he thereupon took his departure, far more joyful than he had been for many a long week past. "I mustn't disturb those young people," he said. "If M. Blandureau wishes to see me, he can come and find me."

It was this that happened. After waiting several days for his chosen son-in-law, M. Blandureau came one morning to Paris. He seemed very distressed and abruptly asked "Do you love my daughter?"

"Certainly I do," replied Hector ; "like a sister."

"Well," resumed M. Blandureau. "I must acquaint you with a very grave circumstance. Your friend 'Lord' Wellesley is in love with Aurélie."

Hector could scarcely conceal his delight. "Are you sure of that?" he asked.

"Well—yes—I am ; and so I think it would be best for you to hasten your preparations, and get the marriage over as soon as possible."

"I must thank you for warning me," said Hector. "I will see to the matter." And as M. Blandureau insisted on the necessity of an early wedding, the young fellow imitated Don Juan's example in reference to Monsieur Dimanche, so that the ex-merchant eventually had to retire without any decision being arrived at.

He was certainly surprised by Hector's apparent indifference, but a yet greater surprise awaited him at home ; for Mademoiselle Aurélie requested him to grant her the favour of a few minutes' private conversation. She was now really in love with Sir James, and was determined to break off the engagement with Hector at any price. The advantages of such a course were unmistakeable. By marrying the baronet she would become "her ladyship." She would leave France to reside in England, where no one would be acquainted with her plebian origin. Her husband's poverty would be no obstacle whatever, for she was wealthy enough for both of them. And finally, as we have before said, she really loved Sir James. Accordingly she resolutely told her father that she would never consent to marry Hector. M. Blandureau's astonishment and anger may be more easily imagined than described. "Do you know what you are saying?" he asked. "Don't you know that I have given my word."

"Well you must withdraw it, father. That's all."

"Never, never ! Blandureau's word is worth its weight in gold !"

"Perhaps so ; but then I never gave *my* word, and so I have no promise to keep."

"Why, you unfortunate girl, M. Malestrat's presence here alone implied acceptance on your part. No doubt I drew up the promissory note, but you endorsed it; and, besides, think of Hector's despair! Do you want to make him miserable for life?"

"Do you really think that he loves me, father?"

"If he loves you? Ah! If you had only heard in what a tone he said to me an hour ago, 'I love Mademoiselle Aurélie as if she were my sister.'"

The young lady could not refrain from laughing. "And do you think that sufficient?" she asked.

"Why," replied her father, "I don't mind telling you that I didn't at all love your mother when we married, and yet you know how happy we've been together."

"Perhaps so, father," retorted Mademoiselle Aurélie; "but I don't desire such happiness at any price." And with an air of defiance she added: "Besides, I'm not one of those girls who are forced to marry against their will."

"How dare you?" exclaimed the infuriated merchant. "Well, I swear that the earth shall cease to turn and the sun to shine before I retract my word." And so saying he left the room, banging the door behind him.

Mademoiselle Aurélie was, however, by no means alarmed. She was not going to abandon her hopes so easily, and an hour later Hector received a note from her, in which, without giving him any particulars, she appealed to him as 'a man of honour' to withdraw from his suit.

Hector could not do this without seeing her and talking with her; and so he immediately hired a vehicle and drove to Ville d'Avray. A fortnight had elapsed since he had last seen Aurélie, and in the meanwhile love had so transfigured her that she could be scarcely recognised. No doubt she was still statuesque, but the marble of her nature was animated, as it were, by Cupid's electric spark. With a modest air she briefly told him the truth, saying that she had written to him because she was sure of Sir James's love. Hector was quite touched by the expression of anguish which her features assumed when, in conclusion, she renewed her previous request. "I will obey you, mademoiselle," he said; "and I hope that in default of winning your love my conduct may make me worthy of your friendship." And on the spot he asked for a private interview with M. Blandureau.

Under any other circumstances he would have dreaded the retired merchant's anger, but now he was so joyful that he did not give it a thought. In point of fact, M. Blandureau received him fairly badly. Although he was inwardly quite as delighted as Hector, he thought that honour required him to assume an indignant mien. He expostulated, offered never to receive Sir James in his house again, proposed an increase of dowry, and when he found the young fellow inflexible, he overwhelmed him with reproaches. "Your worthy father," he said at last, "would never have acted like this; but as you positively refuse to marry my daughter, for the refusal comes from you, mind, and without the least palpable motive, you must write and sign me a declaration to that effect."

Hector joyfully did as he was bid; and then, after taking leave of M. Blandureau, he hurried to the nearest *café* and wrote to Ferdinand Aubanel as follows:—"Everything is arranged. Come to Paris at once. I am waiting for you."

That same evening M. Blandureau gave his consent to his daughter's marriage with Sir James Wellesley, and profited of the change to take half-

a-million francs off Aurélie's dowry. It was only then that the baronet learnt that his future father-in-law had made his fortune in commercial enterprises, and he had some little difficulty in silencing his aristocratic prejudices. However, he consoled himself by reflecting, "After all, who will know it in England?"

One morning, a few days later, Hector was engaged at his toilet when a servant of the hotel he was staying at in Paris announced the arrival of a visitor. "Let him come in," said Hector, feeling convinced that it was Ferdinand, whom he was hourly expecting.

But in lieu of M. Aubanel, it was Sir James who crossed the threshold, looking extremely grave and pale, and carrying in one hand a little mahogany box, which he carefully laid on the table. "I have to speak with you on serious matters," he said to Hector. "Are you sure no one can overhear us?"

"Oh, quite sure," replied Hector, whom this strange preamble greatly surprised.

However, the Englishman went towards the door and made sure that it was properly closed. Then returning to his friend, he said, "I have come to tell you that I am a guilty scoundrel, quite undeserving of your friendship. I loathe myself, and my own conscience reproaches me quite as much as you could do. I was engaged to a young girl. I have jilted her, and yesterday I had to write and confess to her mother that I was a perjured villain. To-day I have come to tell you that I have deceived you in the most infamous style, for I have robbed you of the heart of the girl you were going to marry. I love Aurélie, and she loves me; and her father has, moreover, promised me her hand."

"Oh, you are the best and worthiest of men," interrupted Hector, pressing the baronet to his heart. "If you ever need a safe friend count on me. What can I do for you? Do you want all my fortune? Speak!"

Sir James fancied that Hector was losing his mind, and his remorse became yet more acute. "Return to yourself," he said; "I have not yet finished. What I am about to propose to you is no doubt not customary in England, but it is customary in France; and in France one must do as the French do. I wish to offer you all the satisfaction a Frenchman could claim. I have here a box of pistols, and only one of the weapons is loaded. You may choose, and—"

"What, you want to fight a duel with me!" cried Hector. "And why, pray? Don't put yourself out like that. I wasn't in love with Mademoiselle Aurélie."

"Whether you loved her or not," Sir James replied, "my conduct is none the less perfidious and odious. But I repeat I have pistols here—"

"You are mad," retorted Hector, shrugging his shoulders. "What! you take Mademoiselle Aurélie away from me, and now you want to fight a duel with me in American style, and perhaps kill me into the bargain!"

Sir James was waxing wrathful. "It's too late to retreat," he said. "After apologising to you in the way I've done, I could never support the sight of you afterwards. You refuse the reparation I offered, let it be so; but now I demand satisfaction."

The quarrel might have ended in a tragical manner, if at this very moment there had not come a knock at the door. The new-comer was Ferdinand, who, on receiving Hector's note, had hastened to Paris with all possible speed. As soon as the situation was explained to him, he turned and exclaimed, "You know that I speak English like a Cockney, so just

retire and let me arrange this matter with Sir James Wellesley." He did know how to arrange matters and no mistake, for as soon as Hector had retreated into his bedroom, he bluntly told Sir James the whole story of his friend's passion for Louise d'Ambleçay. The baronet's fury knew no bounds. "I have been tricked," he cried, and he demanded satisfaction in such a haughty, imperious voice that Hector precipitately returned. Then there was a final explanation, with the result that on the following morning the two adversaries met in the Bois de Vincennes, where Hector gratified Sir James with a pretty little sword thrust in the arm which postponed his marriage for six weeks. The few drops of blood which the baronet lost served, however, to re-cement their momentarily broken friendship.

XI.

FERDINAND was as proud as the hero of a Roman triumph on the evening, when, after three weeks' absence in Paris, he arrived at La Fresnaie, accompanied by his friend Hector. They were expected, and the house had quite a festive appearance. Madame Aubanel, who had been apprised by her husband of all that had occurred in Paris, had prepared for Hector the most delightful of all possible surprises. By dint of eloquence she had prevailed on Madame d'Ambleçay to come and dine at La Fresnaie with her daughter. The baroness had tried to resist, but what reason was there to refuse? Sir James had officially acquainted her with the breaking off of his engagement, and she had written to give him back his promise. Thus, when Hector entered the drawing-room that evening the first person he perceived was Louise, and the long look which the two lovers exchanged was quite a poem, expressing as it were all their past anguish and present felicity. Hector had not expected such happiness; he had feared some fresh obstacle, and to avoid falling he had to lean for a moment on his friend's arm. Then bowing respectfully to the baroness, he exclaimed in a voice trembling with emotion, "If I dare to reappear before you, madame, it is because the conditions you specified have been or are being fulfilled." And at the same time he handed her a folded paper.

This was the circular-letter by which M. and Madame Blandureau had "the honour of informing their friends and acquaintances of the approaching marriage of their daughter, Mademoiselle Aurélie Blandureau, with Sir James Wellesley, Bart." Madame d'Ambleçay gave the document a careless glance, for it told her nothing new, and then turning to her daughter, exclaimed with an air of affected sadness—"Well, my poor Louise, here is Sir James Wellesley jilting you for another young lady."

Although for the last fortnight or so, Mademoiselle Louise had been really rejoicing over the baronet's treason, she now did all she could to look surprised, and like an artful young minx, she even tried a little pout of vexation; but she was not skilled in the art of dissimulation, and her beaming eyes belied the motion of her lips.

"And when is Sir James to be married?" asked the Baroness.

"On the 3rd of May," answered Ferdinand. "Thanks to my diplomacy, which rather *hastened* the wedding than otherwise."

"Well then," resumed Madame d'Ambleçay, "I think we can make our preparations for the same date." And taking hold of Louise's hand she placed it in Hector's.

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M. and Madame Hector Malestrat now-a-days reside in Touraine, in a pretty house they had built midway between La Fresnaie and the château d'Ambleçay. Hector never returned to Bordeaux, but sold his house there, with all its furniture and appointments. Mademoiselle Aurélie, now lady Wellesley, reigns at Follingham Hall, her husband's seat in Lincolnshire, which has been magnificently restored since their marriage. Her paternal name having by chance been mentioned among the landed gentry and aristocracy of the neighbourhood, she did not hesitate to convey the impression that the Blandureaus were allied to the greatest families in France. Worshipped by her husband, whose love she returns, Aurélie is so happy that she has never even wished for the death of that uncle whose demise will make her a peeress; and although both Hector and Sir James have children, you may be certain that they will never seek wives or husbands for them until they reach the proper age for matrimony. As worthy M. Blandureau often remarks—"Promises of marriage made by parents in reference to their children are bills of exchange drawn on the future, which is the unsafest of all debtors." And he might add that chance is and will always remain the most successful match-maker.

THE END.

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Judges who sternly bid us "kotoo,"
Who find the New Courts a little too airy,
Shall bow to the law of the SOCIAL Zoo.

As for those who the flame of science kindle,
Who out of the old keep evolving the new,
Huxley will study descent with Tyndall
In the monkey-house of the SOCIAL ZOO.

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